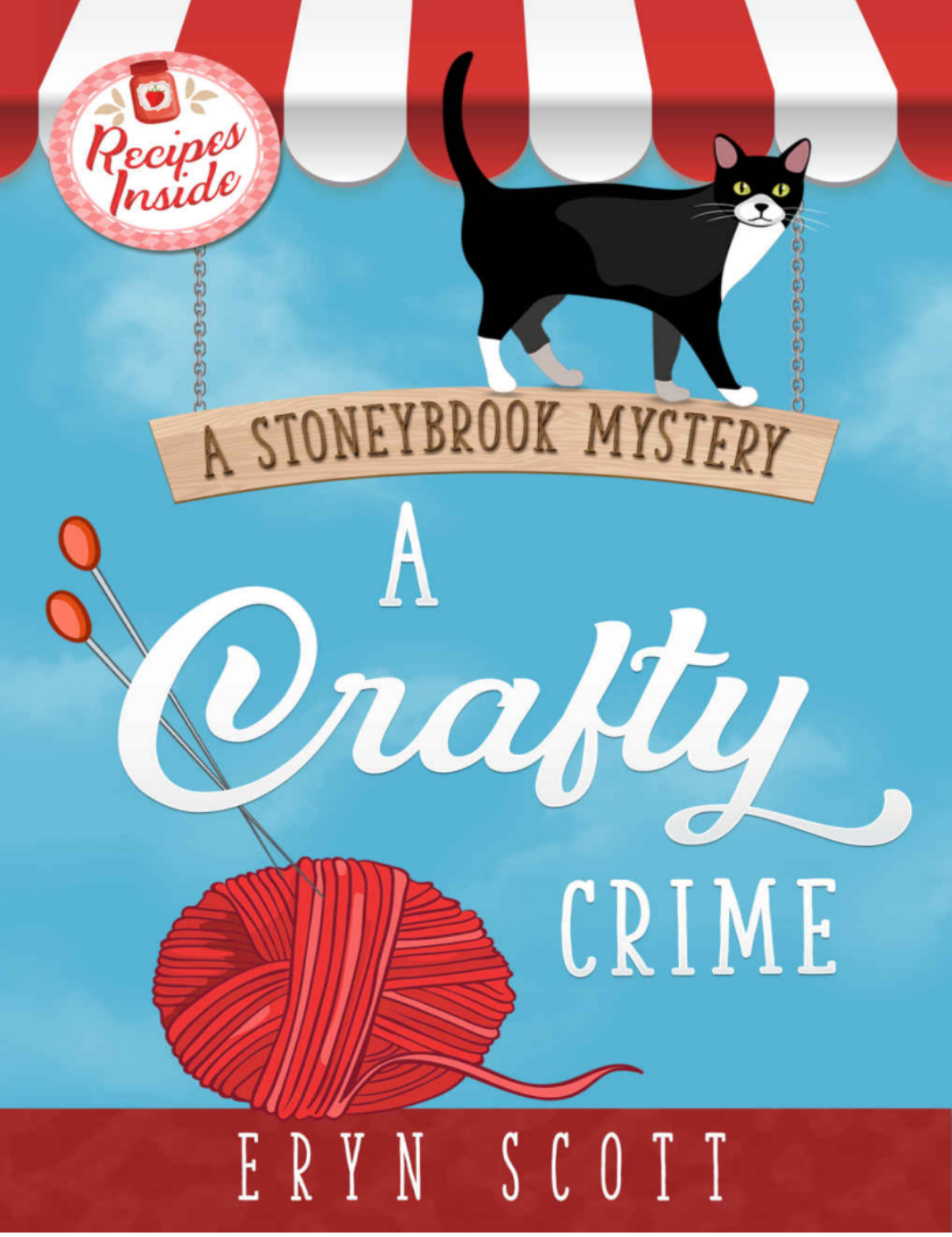

Recipes Inside
A STONEYBROOK MYSTERY
A Crafty CRIME
ERYN SCOTT

A Crafty Crime

A Stoneybrook Mystery

Eryn Scott

Kristopherson Press

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Cover by Mariah Sinclair

Recipes by Marisa McClellan, creator of Food in Jars

For Shadow, my very first kitten.
Thanks for adopting me.

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Recipes
Untitled
Also by Eryn Scott
About the Author

1

When people asked Hadley James what day of the week she liked best, she would always answer Saturday, without hesitation.

Until that particular Saturday.

Even though her day was doomed to go down the drain faster than a failed batch of jam, it began remarkably well.

Hadley woke to the spring sun streaming in through her bedroom window. In the small mountain valley tucked in northwest Washington, sun was always welcome. She appreciated it even more that morning, as it marked the first outside market of the year.

The year-round Stoneybrook Farmers Market moved inside during the fall and winter months, but Hadley loved it when they transitioned to Fenton Park for the spring and summer. She was ecstatic to get out of the community center and into the fresh air.

The last few months had been difficult to say the least, and this spring felt like a new start for Hadley.

She didn't exactly jump out of bed with a smile on her face, but her excitement for the market that day definitely made it a little easier to roll out from under the covers and stumble into the shower.

Her enthusiasm built as she went through her morning routine, almost making her feel like a kid again. The feeling was so strong that, as Hadley headed down the stairs, she decided to take them at a run, skipping the last three steps like she used to as a little kid and landing with a thump in the hall. Unlike when she was younger, however, her left knee gave a twinge of pain as her feet touched down on the old wood floor.

Hadley winced, reaching down to massage the aching joint. She was only thirty, but body parts that had never been in pain before now seemed to scream out in complaint. *Ugh*, she thought. *I seriously needed to increase my supplements*. Never had she foreseen being so interested in the merits of glucosamine and fiber.

Shaking out her knee, Hadley headed into the kitchen to put together a breakfast suitable for eating on the go. Then she sent a quick message to her best friend, Suzanne.

On my way, but I have to stop at Edith's to feed the cat.

Suzanne answered right back.

Thanks for the heads-up. Have I mentioned lately that you're a WAY better person than me? I don't know how you put up with that woman.

Hadley sent back a winking emoji and shook her head.

That woman was Edith Butler, and she had been her great-aunt's best friend before she'd passed away. Hadley wasn't about to turn her back on the woman like the others in Stoneybrook had. Though to be fair to the rest of the town, Edith *was* cranky, combative, and downright nosy. But since Hadley's divorce finalized just a couple months ago and close to half the town was barely speaking to her, she'd started to feel a kind of affinity with Edith. So she'd told Mrs. Butler she would look after her cat while the older woman visited her sister's.

An apple, cheese, and her water bottle would have to do for breakfast. After tucking them under one arm, Hadley grabbed her purse and headed outside. She followed the little stone path around to the side of the house where a pink bike was propped up against the siding. Placing her belongings in the wicker basket tied to the front, she wheeled it around to the driveway.

Her twin brother, Paul, had gotten the bike for her on their birthday last year and although he'd stuck the basket on as a joke, Hadley couldn't imagine doing without it at that point. His joke had proven to be quite thoughtful.

That was Paul in a nutshell, though. Always trying to mess with her, but actually showing her how much he cared. Not that she'd let the truth about his soft side get out. It might ruin his reputation.

As one of the local deputy sheriffs, Paul had to maintain an air of authority and seriousness, something that wasn't hard to do looking like he did. At well over six feet, Paul was the exact opposite to Hadley in height and build. He was tall and broad shouldered while she cut a smaller, curvier figure. The only thing they shared was their mother's dark hair and their father's blue eyes. But as intimidating as her brother appeared, Hadley knew as well as the rest of the locals that he was a big softy.

What neither Paul nor Hadley had known when he got the bike for her was how handy it would come to be, especially since she'd decided to sell her car to pay for a delivery van just a few months later. And while she'd meant to replace the hatchback, her divorce had left her strapped for cash. So for now, the bike would have to do. It didn't hurt that the heart of downtown was only a ten minute walk away and even the farthest reaches of the valley's riverside farms were accessible with a half-hour bike ride.

The spring air rushed past Hadley as she picked up speed and headed toward Mrs. Butler's little yellow house. Though she couldn't

see it, Hadley could hear the great Cascade River from behind a line of alder trees. She knew the breeze whooshing around her body was from the cold mountain water constantly rushing by.

Edith's house was just a few streets down from Hadley's, but it was at the end of a long road so it always felt like a trek. The little yellow cottage Edith called home was the only house on her road—well, except the Fenton's old tenant house that sat at the back edge of their farm. But no one had lived there for ages.

Biking down Edith's gravel drive, Hadley finally arrived at her house, which sat right on the edge of the Fenton family's longest expanse of grassy farmland.

This was the second time in as many months Hadley had watched Edith's cat. While the woman had seemed surprised when Hadley had offered last time, she seemed almost dumbstruck this time. But it wasn't too much trouble and the woman had an awesome cat, so Hadley didn't mind spending more time with him.

The cat's name was Ansel, after the older woman's favorite photographer—she always said it was because the little cat was black and white, just like Ansel Adam's pictures. Ansel had been the runt of his litter, so he was much smaller than the average house cat. But he made up for his diminutive size with an attitude as big as the mountains captured in his namesake's photos.

Speaking of the fluffy devil, he was perched on the railing of the porch, waiting for her when she rounded the last corner.

Huh, that's odd, Hadley thought as she pumped the brakes and skidded to a stop just outside the white picket fence. Edith had definitely said she was going to leave Ansel inside.

"Hey, buddy," she called as she picked her way down the path into the front garden. "Whatcha doin' out here?"

Ansel dipped his head like he was rubbing up against an invisible hand and meowed.

"You break out?" Hadley glanced at the windows visible from where she stood. A few were open, but they all had screens that appeared to be intact.

Again, Ansel meowed in response, as if he and Hadley were having a conversation.

"Okay, well … Let's go inside then and check the rest of the windows."

She scooped him up with one hand, holding him close as she grabbed Edith's spare key from behind the wooden sign inscribed with *The Butlers*. Fiddling a second with the key in the lock, Hadley opened the door and let Ansel jump down as she stepped inside. He slipped into the other room while she closed the door behind them.

Edith's house always held the distinct, mingled scents of fragrant

lavender and dusty wool. As the owner of the town's knitting shop, Edith not only ordered and sold quality yarns, but had started spinning her own on a spindle she'd purchased a few years ago.

Glancing at the small table in the entryway where she set the keys during her visits, Hadley frowned. Last time, Edith had left a note with instructions for her, telling her how much to feed Ansel, when to let him in and out, and what plants to water in the garden if the temperature wandered high enough. It was *possible* the old woman assumed Hadley knew what to do at this point, but knowing Edith and her controlling ways, that didn't add up.

Hadley walked into the kitchen to where Edith usually set the container of Ansel's dry food alongside a small tower of wet food she liked to mix in so *he didn't get bored*. As she rounded the corner, she saw the countertop was empty of food as well. Hadley frowned, sure she could feel the lines she tried to moisturize away each night form between her eyebrows.

Instead, there was a stack of flyers Edith had been handing out at her yarn shop opposing the proposal to build a golf course in town. Scanning the rest of the countertop, Hadley noticed a stack of colorful bowls, a shiny industrial blender, and a few prescription bottles lined up behind the sink.

"Ansel outside, no note, no food. What is going on, Edith?" Hadley whispered to herself. She picked at her light pink nail polish absentmindedly as she thought.

Seeing a paper stuck underneath the flyers, Hadley moved them aside. Maybe Mrs. B had accidentally covered up her instructions. But as Hadley opened the folded piece of paper, she realized it wasn't a list of directions for a house sitter. The paper she held in her hands was a note, and quite a threatening one at that.

You've already taken what's mine once. I won't stand for it again. Watch your back!

The handwriting was feminine but bold, as if the author had pressed down hard with the pen as she wrote it. A few of the words had three lines underneath, accentuating them. Hadley shook her head. Edith was infamous for leaving angry letters around town, complaining via written word just about as often as she did in person. Hadley wondered who Edith was mad at now.

Suddenly, an ear-piercing yowl split through the silence of the house, making Hadley jump and drop the note onto the counter. The noise had to be Ansel, though Hadley was quite sure she'd never heard the even-tempered cat make any such sound.

Hadley traced the noise to the back of the house, by the sunroom, and headed in that direction.

She skidded to a stop when she found him.

Ansel was pacing at the foot of a floral armchair, the spring morning sunshine creating dappled patterns on his dark fur as he walked.

In the chair sat Edith Butler. Her head was tipped forward and her eyes were closed, but there was something about the pallor of her skin that told Hadley the woman wasn't just taking a nap in her favorite spot.

Shaking worse than an oak leaf on a windy day, she stepped forward and placed two trembling fingers to the woman's neck. Her skin was cold to the touch, but even more concerning was the lack of heartbeat.

She stumbled back as her fears were confirmed. Edith Butler was dead.

Hadley was sure she would never look at Saturdays the same way.

2

"C-come here, Ansel." Hadley tried to coax the cat away from the body while slipping her phone from her pocket at the same time.

Ansel, however, stayed put. He stared at Hadley, his amber eyes glittering with defiance. He wasn't going to leave Edith's side without a fight.

Hadley sighed out a shaky breath and then nodded in understanding. She, however, was not the woman's loyal companion and standing so close to the body royally freaked her out. Taking a few more steps back, she focused on her phone and dialed her brother.

"Hey, Had. What's up?" Paul asked through the phone.

Hadley swallowed and stepped back once more, fingers shaking, and the phone slipped a little.

"Had, you there?" he asked, louder this time.

"Paul." His name was a gasp. "She's not—I found—I'm at Mrs. Butler's." She couldn't seem to make herself say the words.

Her brother's tone tightened. "What's wrong?"

Taking a deep breath, she pushed the answer out all at once. "Edith is dead." She couldn't take her eyes off the woman's unmoving form.

"I'm on my way. Don't move." Paul hung up.

Tucking the phone back into her pocket, she hugged her arms around her middle and looked around. She was alone in the house with a body. Birds chirped happily in the garden outside and the river rushed by just out of sight through a line of trees. The pleasant sounds felt so out of place as Hadley stared at the poor old woman.

Unable to handle the sight any longer, she turned away, settling her attention on the large Ansel Adams photograph of a silvery river snaking around the feet of jagged mountains. She didn't know which range was pictured, and even though it was beautiful, there was something somber about the black and white photograph that seemed to fit this situation much better than the cheery spring day happening outside. Hadley imagined being a part of the picture, wandering the dark hills, looking up at those towering precipices and wondering when everything became so dark.

Several minutes must've passed while she was lost in that

photograph, because the sound of tires screeching to a stop outside pulled Hadley from her thoughts.

Paul.

Scurrying over to the front door, Hadley opened it just in time to see her brother jumping out of his truck. He ran over to her, eyebrows pulled tight over worried eyes. Paul wore his normal tan sheriff's shirt, but it was still unbuttoned. He didn't usually go in to the station until eight on Saturdays, so she must've caught him right in the middle of getting ready.

Paul didn't say anything, but pulled Hadley into a tight hug when he got close enough. For the first time since finding the body, she felt like crying.

"You okay?" Paul asked, moving her out onto the porch.

She nodded as he helped her over to the porch swing. Hadley hadn't realized how wobbly her legs had become until they didn't have to hold her up any longer. "She's in the sunroom, toward the back." She dropped her head back on the cushion.

"Stay here," Paul said. "I'll be right back." He left the door open as he went back inside.

More vehicles pulled up alongside the truck as Paul's fellow deputy, Kevin, and the local physician, Dr. Hall joined her brother inside. They each gave Hadley a grimace and a wave as they walked past her, toward the body inside.

She could hear boots clomping around in the house, but they kept their voices to a murmur while they inspected the scene. That was all right. She didn't want to hear what they were saying anyway. Mrs. Butler was in her seventies, and on a whole lot of medications if those bottles lined up behind her kitchen sink were any indication. Her husband had passed away when Hadley had still been in high school, so she'd been alone for over a decade.

That doesn't mean it's not sad that she's dead. Hadley scoffed at her own narrow thinking.

It wasn't as if she didn't think someone could be happy without a spouse. No, she was definitely better off without Tyler. But after Hadley and Paul's Great-Aunt Lizzy had passed away two years ago, Mrs. Butler hadn't had any friends in town either. Ansel may have been the old woman's only true remaining companion.

At that moment, the footsteps inside grew louder. Hadley glanced back and saw Paul walking toward her, holding Ansel in his arms. The cat still had a wild, worried look in his eyes, but with each stroke from Paul's large hand, he seemed to settle.

"Ansel's getting in the way. Can he stay out here with you?"

Hadley held out her hands. "Of course. Come here, boy."

Paul handed off the cat, giving her a small smile before heading

back inside. Hadley wondered if she would be able to contain the cat. From the way he had been protecting the body of his owner she figured he'd run right back the moment Paul set him down. But once his paws hit her lap, his body relaxed. Ansel let out a big sigh, curled up into a ball, and then began to purr.

Combing her fingers over his fur, she whispered, "Poor guy. It's been a rough day for you too, huh?"

He looked up at her and blinked slowly, as if agreeing.

Paul came out a few minutes later to write down Hadley's statement. She told him about Edith asking her to watch Ansel, seeing the cat outside that morning, the absence of notes or food left inside, and then the yowl that eventually brought her to find the woman's body. As she talked, she picked at the nail polish on her fingernails, wondering if she'd have any left by tonight the way the day was going.

"And the door was locked when you arrived?" Paul asked.

"Yes. I used the key." A tumultuous feeling rolled through her for some reason as she answered.

Now she couldn't seem to remember hearing the click of the lock moving out of the deadbolt. She hadn't tried the door before she'd unlocked it. Could it have been left unlocked? Edith never did that, though, saying she kept it locked ever since Henry had passed away. Hadley shook away the silly wondering. Of course the door had been locked. She wondered why her stomach still felt tight at the thought.

But before she could think on the feeling too much, another patrol car pulled into the driveway, drawing her attention away. Well, calling it a car wasn't accurate. Next to the older vehicles that Paul and Kevin drove around, the monstrous, flashy SUV seemed like something from the future. And while all three of the vehicles sported the county's sheriff decal, it was easy to tell which were from Stoneybrook and which was from the bigger city of Cascade Ridge, twenty minutes north.

Sheriff McKay jumped out of the SUV, at least as much as his round shape would allow him to, and came hurtling down Edith's front path. The man grumbled like the motor of a classic car—one that had been poorly maintained.

Paul jumped to his feet, straightening his uniform and finally buttoning his shirt. "Sir."

"Deputy James, don't come in until that shirt's tucked in," McKay grumbled as he walked past the twins and into the house.

Paul's cheeks flushed, and when he finished with the last button, he began stuffing the shirt into his pants.

Mark McKay was in his forties, so he wasn't too much older than the James twins, but by the way he treated Paul, one would think he

was talking to a silly child. McKay was portly to the extent that he was almost as wide as he was tall. That, plus his initials, had led to the locals giving him the nickname, Sheriff M&M—his shape closely resembled the red candy-character from the commercials.

A quiet, thin man with gray hair strode behind the paunchy sheriff. Paul started to follow them into the house, but M&M barked at him. "Don't worry. Take your time, James. You obviously need to get yourself together." Without another glance, he pulled the front door shut after the tall man.

Paul stopped, mid-stride, then turned back toward Hadley, taking a deep, calming breath and blowing it out.

"I really, really dislike that man," Hadley said, gritting her teeth.

An appreciative smile broke across Paul's face. He usually defended the sheriff's actions, but Hadley could tell the closed door bothered him way more than he would ever admit.

It was easy for Hadley to forget Paul wasn't the top dog in these parts because Mark McKay spent most of his time in Cascade Ridge. There was no love lost with the Stoneybrook residents, who were happy to stick with Paul and Kevin, avoiding McKay as much as possible. The sheriff would, however, grace them with his presence during a quarterly visit downstream or if Paul or Kevin called and requested his presence.

But their request was often the end of the sheriff's collaboration with his deputies. Despite the fact that Paul had grown up in town and —along with the other deputy, Kevin—kept Stoneybrook running 99 percent of the time, the sheriff routinely refused any help, even though the local deputies had advice that could make his work ten times easier.

It looked like this case was starting the same way.

"Who was that guy with him?" Hadley asked.

Chewing on the inside of his cheek like he did whenever he was thinking, Paul blinked, then looked at her. "That's the medical examiner from the county office up in Cascade Ridge."

Hadley's mouth formed a little o, and she glanced down at the sleeping cat in her lap.

Paul flipped through his notebook. "You're free to head out, Had. I've got your statement. I know where to find you if McKay needs anything more than that." He gave her shoulder a little shove. "You've got the market today, and I know how much you love when it moves outside. Plus, it'll be good for you to take your mind off … all of this."

Hadley sighed. She had been checking her watch a lot the past half hour, worried she was cutting it close but not wanting to be insensitive to Mrs. Butler's situation.

"Okay." She peeled the sleeping cat off her lap, setting him next to

her on the porch swing. Hadley stood, patting his fur off her jeans and looking around. As much as she wanted to get as far away from the body as she could, it felt odd to just take off.

"Go. We'll be fine." Paul nodded encouragingly.

"Right. Yeah. Okay. See you later." Hadley started up the path toward her bike.

She'd only gotten a few yards away when she heard a series of meows. When she looked back, Ansel had jumped down off the porch swing, and was following her. His golden yellow eyes flashed in the sunshine as he looked up at her and seemed to ask, "Where are you going?"

She knelt down and petted him. "Sorry, buddy. I've got to go to work. I'll come visit you later." When Paul walked over, she picked the cat up and handed it to him.

Hadley walked the rest of the way up to her bike. While she buckled on her helmet, Ansel watched her as if she were a bug he was hunting. When she threw one leg over the bike and moved it out onto the road, a loud yowl echoed in the quiet street.

"Ouch! Ansel!" Paul yelled.

When she looked over her shoulder, Paul had dropped Ansel and was rubbing at angry, red marks on his forearms. Now free, Ansel galloped across the garden, his body stretched long to accommodate the speed. He scaled the white picket fence with ease and was standing next to Hadley's bike within seconds. Before she could say a word, Ansel wagged his back half a few times, then jumped straight into the wicker basket along with Hadley's purse and to-go breakfast.

Her mouth dropped open at the sight. A loud laugh rang out from the garden. Hadley turned to see her brother smiling and shaking his head.

"Looks like he's going with you," Paul said with a smirk.

3

Any worry Hadley had felt that Ansel might jump out of the basket dissolved as she picked up speed. The cat looked like he'd been riding along in bike baskets his whole life—all two years of it. He blinked, glancing around happily at the valley scenery as Hadley's tires crunched along the country road. The wind generated by their speed flicked through his whiskers, pushing them back as it ruffled the rest of his fur.

While Hadley was an exceptionally safe bicyclist, she took extra care to lengthen her stopping distance and utilize her arm signals because of her precious cargo.

Maybe I should get the little guy a helmet of his own, Hadley mused as she turned onto Main Street. But just as soon as the thought came, she pushed it away. Ansel wasn't hers ... as much as she wished he could be. She was simply watching him until Paul and the rest of the Stoneybrook officials were able to figure out where he would go now that his owner was deceased. She hated how her stomach sank at the thought of giving him up, but there was nothing she could do about it.

Hadley focused as she maneuvered her bike through the foot and vehicle traffic of downtown Stoneybrook. Main Street was quite the departure from the green fields hugging the mighty Cascade River out by where she and Mrs. Butler lived.

Downtown was adorable, as almost every tourist commented while wandering down the two main shopping streets. Because most of the buildings shared an older-style, brick architecture, the town council had put up striped awnings to delineate each storefront. Each had a different color matched with the white stripes, creating a colorful, candy-box feel. The North Cascades loomed behind the buildings, their rocky faces amplifying the rushing sound of the river as it snaked around the town.

Toward the end of the street, a building came into view with a lavender-and-white striped awning. The sign on the front said, **Pretty Jam Good Canning Headquarters** and then in the window, signs told customers that a retail space was **Coming Soon!**

Pulling into an alley between two buildings, Hadley carefully slowed and then came to a stop in the small concrete loading area

behind. Not only did the loading area hold her van—lovingly dubbed The Jam Van—but that morning it also held her best friend, Suzanne Till, who was leaning on her back door waiting for her.

Hadley and Suze had been best friends since preschool, so Hadley knew by the way her friend was chewing on her bottom lip that she was unsettled by her tardiness. In addition to a worried expression, Suze wore a paint-splattered smock, a long, flowing printed blouse underneath, and her usual wild, wonderful mass of curly brown hair.

"A little late? This is more than just a little late, Had. I already loaded all of my art into the van. I'm supposed to be the one who's bad with time, you know," Suze said, walking forward. But any exasperation on her face fell away as she noticed the black and white cat perched inside the bike basket. "Wh—wait—is that Ansel?" She pointed at the cat, tipping her head to one side as she considered him.

Hadley nodded, then with a careful deliberateness, explained to her best friend what had happened that morning.

"Omigosh. I can't believe it." Suze covered her mouth with her hand. "I mean …" She paused. "I guess she was getting up there in years, but … she still seemed so feisty."

Feisty was a nice way to put it.

"Right? I figured she was so stubborn she'd outlive us all."

Suze leaned forward to scratch Ansel's chin. "This must've been quite the morning for you, poor darling."

Hadley sighed. "I guess he's going to have to stick it out with me today. He wouldn't leave Edith's side at first, but once Paul took him away from her so they could … examine her, he seems to have switched his affections to me."

"Well, cat or no cat, you'd better get moving."

Checking her watch, Hadley's eyes widened. "Ugh. It's even later than I thought."

Scooping Ansel out of the basket, she dug her keys from her pocket with her free hand. She let herself and Suzanne into the industrial kitchen, and took a right toward her small office.

"While my customers love the creative ingredients I include in my jams, I doubt they'd be so happy if one of them was cat hair, so you'll have to stay in here for now." She deposited him onto her bright purple office chair, closed the door, and then glanced back at Suzanne.

"The poor guy hasn't eaten all day. I didn't want to ask Paul to go digging around in Edith's house for food. Do you mind if I—"

Suze interrupted her with a dismissive wave, saying, "Go, go. I've got it under control here. You just want the spring flavors, right?"

Hadley nodded. "I put the boxes I need there." Hadley pointed to a stack next to the back door. "I already loaded the table, cloth, and my

signs last night before I went home."

Suze scoffed. "Psh. Girl, you're so prepared. I was still putting the finishing designs on a print a half an hour ago."

Suzanne was an amazing artist. And while her heart was mostly behind the large watercolor landscapes she painted, most of her income came from the graphic design work she commissioned through her website and from the town's many businesses. She also rented a space downtown—three buildings down—and rented the booth space right next to Hadley's at the farmers market.

"Looks like I didn't need to worry about you after all," Suze said, lifting the first box. "Go get that little guy some food."

Hadley complied, grabbing her purse and heading out onto Main Street. Her stomach sank as she remembered it would take her a good twenty minutes to get to the local pet store and back, even on her bike. Which meant the closest store that would have cat food and supplies was the Henley Family Grocer, her ex-in-laws' store.

Taking a deep breath, she jogged across the street and one block down to the grocer. It was just a store and she was a paying customer. They wouldn't hassle her. Right? She bit back a laugh. If she'd learned anything from being a part of the family for a decade, it was that they were passionate people. Good if you were on their side. Not so good if you weren't.

Hadley had gone a good two months without having to step foot in the store. Between the farmers market, online ordering, and the tiny Hal's Food N Stuff out by the highway, she'd been able to get everything she needed. Until now.

The electric doors slid open as she walked up to the street-side entrance—the parking lot entrance behind was the more high traffic route, so Hadley was hoping she might slip in unnoticed. Cool, conditioned air washed over her at the same time the lame music did.

As long as they hadn't changed too much around in the past few months, Hadley knew just where she was going and what she needed. She'd often helped out during inventory, especially in high school when they'd needed a few extra hands and she'd needed a few extra bucks.

Finding the pet supplies in the same back corner, she grabbed a small bag of dried food, a few cans of wet food and piled them into a litter box along with a small bag of litter. About to head to the register, her eye caught on a feather toy that suctioned to a door or window. Hadley grabbed it, then walked with purpose toward the register.

Maybe it would be her lucky day and one of the nonrelated members of the staff would be wor—

Hadley skidded to a stop as she noticed Tara, her ex-sister-in-law

behind the one open register.

Nope. No such luck.

She wasn't proud of it, but she briefly considered running straight for the door without paying. It wasn't like the Henleys' opinion of her could get any lower. Since she'd filed for divorce, they all thought she was a selfish crook. Shoplifting would only fit their expectations. But the impulse passed, and she squared her shoulders as she walked forward.

If the moment Tara recognized Hadley wasn't so awkward and awful, she might've laughed at the variety of emotions that passed over the woman's face. Recognition, shock, anger, and then confusion when her gaze landed on the pile of cat supplies clutched in Hadley's arms.

Once she settled on an emotion—thinly veiled hatred—Tara narrowed her eyes and flicked something on the conveyor, starting it moving. Hadley stepped forward and placed her purchases on the black belt.

Tara silently rung up each item, studying it, then Hadley, then the item once more before scanning it. Hadley felt her cheeks heat up. Needing something to do, she stepped down to the other end of the register and caught the items as Tara pushed them down the sloped counter toward the bags. Hadley didn't need a bag and placed everything back in the kitty litter bin just like she'd had it before.

Thinking she might actually get away without having to talk with Tara, Hadley swiped her card. Her fingers twitched as they waited for each question on the small card-reader screen.

"So you're not planning on getting married again, I see." Tara's tone gave away the sly smirk on her lips so well Hadley felt no need to look up and confirm it was there.

Hadley sighed. "One cat does not a crazy lady make." She pushed the last button on the pad, happy to be so close to getting out of there.

"Depends if the lady's already crazy or not," Tara deadpanned. "Or wait, was that crazy or just terrible?"

This time, Hadley did look up. Tara's face was twisted into a mock question as she held out Hadley's receipt.

"Well … it takes crazy to know crazy," Hadley said, snatching the paper from Tara and grabbing her stuff before storming out of there.

She waited until she was across the street and entering her kitchen through the back door before she let her head hang forward in defeat.

"That bad?" Suze asked. She'd twisted her hair up into a loose bun, a paint-splattered stick holding it together.

Hadley frowned. "Tara."

"Ugh. Say no more."

Tyler's older sister had taken too much pleasure in pushing Hadley

and Suzanne around even when they were younger. She'd never quite warmed up to Hadley, even when she and Tyler had tied the knot.

"She turns me into a frustrated teenager all over again." Hadley walked into the kitchen and set the cat supplies down on the floor outside the office. "I think I even called myself crazy at one point."

"Sorry." Suze cringed, but Hadley could see her stifle a laugh.

"This is not funny."

"Come on," Suze said, trying to get a smile out of her. "It sorta is."

Hadley shrugged.

"Well, over here in Adult World, the van is all ready to go." Suze ran her shoulder into Hadley's. "Get that cat set up so we can go."

After a few minutes Ansel was purring away as he ate his food. Hadley set a blanket on her chair for him, which was sitting in a lovely sunbeam during this time of the day. Not only did the little cat have food, water, and a proper bathroom, but Hadley suctioned the feather toy she'd bought to the window just in case he needed entertainment.

Satisfied he was taken care of, Hadley closed the door to her office and headed out to the van. She and Suze drove the few minutes down to the park and pulled in next to the other vendors who had already started setting up. Almost every car, truck, or van sat open as people made trips back and forth to their designated spot in the lush, green grass.

Half an hour later, Hadley stood in front of her table, straightening the sign Suze had painted for her last year that read **Pretty Jam Good: Canned Creations by Hadley James.** Then she fixed the stack of strawberry-rhubarb jam in the middle so they would match the cherry-merlot and almond-apricot stacks on either side. Even though Hadley sold over a dozen varieties of her jams at all times on her website, she tried to keep the ones she brought to the market as seasonally appropriate as she could. There wasn't much demand for her pumpkin spiced rum butter during warm, sunny days like this one.

Folding open her chair, Hadley sank into the seat, glad Paul had convinced her to come here to take her mind off Edith. The last thirty minutes had been wonderful, losing herself in her normal routine. But even though she'd left Ansel safe in her office, Hadley knew it was just a matter of time before people heard what had happened.

Secrets were hard to keep in a small town like Stoneybrook. She knew from experience.

In fact, the whispering and staring had already begun. Hadley felt they showed considerable restraint, waiting until there was only a quarter of an hour before the market opened to approach the jam table. Louise Stanton turned out to be the chosen representative.

Suze was just rearranging a few piles of screen-printed T-shirts

when she let out a two-toned whistle to alert Hadley, but she needn't have; Hadley had seen the small woman approaching ever since she'd broken away from the knitting table across the grassy walkway. She wore her peppered-with-gray, brown hair twisted up into a tortoiseshell clip that matched her glasses.

"Hadley, my dear." Louise came right around Hadley's table and pulled her into a tight hug. "We all heard. I want to say I'm surprised, but honestly, that woman was so unhappy I'm surprised it took this long for her to … you know."

It took Hadley a moment to register what she'd heard. She tipped her head to one side. "Wait, you think it was suicide?" Hadley whispered that last word, though she wasn't sure why; if Louise was telling this to her, it meant she'd already told a dozen others.

Louise shrugged. "Well, it would only make sense."

Hadley shouldn't have been surprised by Louise's statement; she knew the level of disregard at which most of Stoneybrook held Edith Butler. And Louise had even more reason to dislike Edith, being the one other person who worked at Main Street Skeins, Edith's knitting shop. Hadley had heard all of the terrible things Edith had said to Louise over the years, had even witnessed Louise's less-than-ideal working conditions on many occasions. But still, she'd expected a little more humility from her town in light of that morning's events.

"Please, let's not be catty at a time like this." Hadley leveled a disappointed stare at the woman.

Louise patted Hadley's hand. "You're such a good girl. Yes, of course. Don't speak ill of the dead and all that." She took a step back. "Well, we just wanted you to know how proud we are that you decided to show up today, considering." She turned to leave.

Suze snorted in response from where she sat at her booth, but if Louise heard her, she didn't let on.

"Mrs. B wasn't my favorite either, but gosh, you'd think they could at least wait a few days before bringing out the claws." Suze walked over to stand next to Hadley as Louise left.

"Tell me about it," Hadley said, shaking her head.

"At least it's time for the market to open, so they'll be stuck behind their booths for the next few hours."

"We can only hope." Hadley shaded her eyes with her hand as a wave of tourists walked in through the park entrance.

4

Fortunately, Hadley had been right. The vendors were much too busy to come over and inquire about Edith's passing once the market opened. Unfortunately, she had a list of items in her purse that she needed to pick up today and eventually *had* to venture out from behind her jam table.

Suze and Hadley often watched each other's booths during slow market times, allowing them to get some shopping done without losing out on potential sales.

The spring sunshine blanketed Hadley as she walked through the market, making her want to roll up her long sleeves. Unlike summer and winter—which bowled into the Cascade Valley like an avalanche—spring and fall crept into the valley, tiptoeing in so unassumingly that Hadley was always pleasantly surprised by their arrival.

She smiled and waved to Barry, sitting behind a table displaying rows of his local honey. Hadley didn't need anything from him this weekend, having just purchased three jars of his wildflower honey last Saturday, but just looking at the rich, golden decadence made her crave a freshly baked scone with butter and a generous honey drizzle with some of her almond-apricot jam.

"Afternoon, Miss James," Barry said, taking his hat off and tipping his head forward in a small bow.

The man's crazy, white hair seemed like it was trying to escape with the way it sprung out in all directions when released from the confines of the floppy hat. Barry returned the hat to his head, smiling at Hadley through an equally white, messy—though endearing—beard.

Hadley wished she could linger and chat with Barry, knowing the kind man was one of the few here who wouldn't stoop to fanatical gossip. He was calm, quiet, and careful, having to be to keep his many bees from *gettin' him*, as he called the infrequent times he was stung. And although Hadley was far larger and more complex than a bee, she had always felt the same soothing effect from his demeanor.

Moving on, she stopped at the next booth, the local quilting club's triple-table setup. With five of them creating everything from potholders to full quilts, they had a lot of merchandise to display and

were one of the largest operations at the market, except for the produce and nursery booths. The local quilt club saved their larger scrap pieces for Hadley each week so she could use them as cute additions to her jam lids after running a pair of pinking shears along the rough edges. As many times as Hadley had offered to pay for the fabric, the women refused to let her give them a dime.

However, in addition to being incredibly generous, they were also unfailingly gossipy, so Hadley steeled her resolve as she stepped forward.

"Shh, shh, shh."

"Hadley's here."

"Ladies, look alive."

"Ida, Think about your word choice. Really."

Hadley had to suppress an eye roll. They were also painfully bad at hiding anything.

"Hi, ladies." Hadley clasped her hands in front of her as she waited for the inevitable questions.

"Oh, Hadley, dear. We just simply cannot believe it." Ida Mae Rogers rushed forward and enveloped Hadley in a tight hug.

The older woman had to be a full foot shorter than Hadley's five-foot-five height, and her thin arms wrapped around Hadley's stomach, making her think twice about all of the scones she'd consumed through the winter months.

"I know. It's terrible, right?" Hadley pressed her lips together and shook her head.

"Completely," June Dewer said from her seat behind Ida.

A sniffling sound came from the end of the table. Hadley found Hazel Smith sitting there red-eyed and clutching a monogrammed handkerchief.

"We're—we're—we're just in … shock!" Hazel cried, stretching the last word out so long that it disappeared into her next wail.

Ida Mae let go of Hadley and scuttled back behind the tables, but Hadley couldn't seem to focus on anything other than Hazel. Remembering Louise's insensitive declaration earlier, if Hadley had expected anyone else to share Louise's feelings about Edith, it would've been Hazel.

Last year, Edith Butler had hired Hazel's son to manage some investments for her—he lived in the city and, according to Hazel, was the best around for growing an investment portfolio. After a few months, Edith's money wasn't performing like she wanted, and she began to look into what he'd been doing with it. Needless to say, things didn't add up. Edith called the Better Business Bureau on him.

They found that he'd not only been skimming money off his older clients' portfolios, but had also invested in a few less-than-real

holdings, figuring the AARP crowd wouldn't notice. The guy had lost his license, and was also serving some time in prison. Hazel, unable to comprehend that her son was capable of such a terrible thing, blamed Edith exclusively for the whole mess, maintaining that Edith had set him up.

Hazel was right next to Louise Stanton on the list of people who hated Edith Butler with a passion.

Not about to come right out and say, *Oh really, Hazel? I thought you would've been happy Edith is dead,* Hadley nodded. "I know," she said instead. "She had so much energy and spunk to just off and die in her sleep."

"And at such a young age," Ida Mae said. "Edith was seven years younger than me."

"Twelve younger than me!" June chimed in.

The other ladies murmured similar statements shaking their heads and patting their hands over their hearts.

"She seemed to be on a lot of medication," Hadley said, hoping to calm the older women, noticing they seemed worried they might be next.

"I think she was just taking something for her high blood pressure," Hazel said. The woman worked at the only pharmacy in town, so she knew what everyone was taking. It was less than ideal since she also was one of the town's biggest gossips.

"But so do I …" Frannie Bloom said, fear leaving the last word half strangled in her throat.

"Me too." June gasped.

Ida Mae just nodded blankly, as if unable to find her voice.

A happy spring bird trilled out a lovely tune in the awkward silence that followed.

Hadley mentally kicked herself. *Gah … way to make the entire quilting society worried they're about to kick the bucket*, she scolded herself.

"I'm sure it was more than just that." Hadley folded her arms across her chest, feeling the discomfort wrap around her like one of their award-winning quilts.

"Well, enough talk of this." Hazel stood up, swiping a tear from her eye as she shoved her shoulders back. "Hadley's had a hard enough day." She bent to pick up a grocery bag full of fabric scraps then handed it to Hadley over the table. "Here you go, dear." Hazel's hands clasped around Hadley's for a moment before she let go of the bag. Her watery, brown eyes held on to Hadley's too, almost just as palpably.

A shiver ran down Hadley's spine despite the warm sun shining down on the market. Between her dramatic reaction to Edith's death

and the intense way she was looking at Hadley, something felt off.

But Hadley had already dealt with too much today to be in a place where she could solve the mystery that was Hazel Smith. She smiled, waved, and turned back toward the other vendors. Just as she did, Hadley caught sight of Dirk and Cathy Croft walking stiffly through the center thoroughfare.

She paused, mouth hanging open. It wasn't as if Dirk and Cathy *never* showed up at the weekly market—they'd come once or twice over the last decade—but Dirk especially was quite vocal about how much he disliked the institution, claiming it took business away from Stoneybrook's brick-and-mortar stores.

How anyone could ever argue that a farmers market was bad for small businesses, Hadley could never understand. The rest of the town seemed to agree, because people mostly wrote Dirk's rants off as just part of his generally disgruntled attitude. And while Cathy wasn't quite as much of a stranger to the market, from the whispers and stares directed at the couple, Hadley could tell she wasn't the only one surprised to see them.

"Here to get the scoop on Edith Butler, no doubt."

Hadley jumped at the voice coming from just over her shoulder. Thea Clark, the local librarian, had sidled up next to Hadley and narrowed her eyes at the Crofts as they walked past.

"Probably," Hadley said, nodding as her heart slowed from the surprise of being snuck up on. "He sure does look skittish."

Thea clicked her tongue in agreement. Cathy stopped to chat with Marie, the secretary for the local attorney, while Dirk glanced around, checking behind his back more than once.

"Doesn't surprise me one bit," Thea said. "That man's only ever had morals as long as they serve his wallet."

Harsh as the statement was, Hadley couldn't disagree. Her own family had been subject to Dirk's greedy ways. When she and Paul had been in high school, Dirk had told their dad he wasn't going to continue his lease for his woodworking shop and storefront in town after two decades. Dirk had found out he could get more money by dividing the building up into three smaller offices and had decided to oust their father. While things had worked out for the better in the end—her father had finally built the shop he'd always wanted on their property—it had been a stressful time for their family, something for which Hadley had yet to find a reason to forgive Dirk.

Thea reached out and latched on to Hadley's forearm, pulling her attention away from the Crofts.

"Sorry to hear you found her," she said, forehead creased. "I know you were one of the few she let get close to her."

Hadley smiled sincerely at the woman. She'd always loved the

librarian, who was just about the same age as her mother. Hadley had always looked up to Thea and admired her kindness and wisdom.

"It's hard feeling like I'm the only one who cares that she's gone." Hadley glanced down at the grass, surprised at the candid nature of her confession.

Thea squeezed her arm once more before letting go. "Don't worry, honey. You're not. Sour as people seemed toward her, they'll miss Edith, *do* miss her."

With that, Thea gave a small wave and kept on her way, back to the used-book sales table the library sponsored.

Passing by the knitting booth, manned by Louise and crowded with locals no doubt asking about Edith's passing, Hadley walked toward the Stoneybrook Spirits booth. The local distillery was a favorite tourist destination, specializing in creative mixes to go along with their award winning liquors. Hadley needed another few bottles for her spring round of jams, knowing how popular the *spirited* recipes were last year.

Luckily, Christine, the distiller and owner, lived far enough down the valley that she didn't get involved much in the local drama. She stuck to chatting about business as she packed up Hadley's order. After that, Hadley swung by the Cascade River Winery, where Tommy, a friend from high school and the tasting room manager, pulled a bag with a few bottles out from under the table and handed it to her. She had to squish to the very edge of the crowd to retrieve her bag. It was a popular booth between the smooth wine samplings and Tommy's even smoother smile.

"I'll send you an invoice, Had." He winked at her and then turned back to the group of women in front of him.

Hadley waved then turned toward her last destination, the Fenton Farm booth. She needed to pick up her weekly bag of lemons—forever grateful for the Fenton's greenhouse which produced the citrus year round—since the fruit was just about as important as sugar in her jams.

But as the large booth that contained everything from fennel to free-range eggs came into view, Hadley stopped short. Her stomach felt like it dropped straight to the ground. She gripped the bags of her purchases so they wouldn't follow.

Luke Fenton stood behind his family's booth.

5

Usually up on town goings-on, Hadley wondered why she hadn't heard anything about Luke visiting from Seattle.

Regardless of the reason for his visit, Hadley knew she wasn't ready for a run-in with her ex-husband's best friend. She would have to bike out to the farm Monday morning to pick up her order from Jolee, Luke's sister. Luke would most likely be gone after the weekend.

With a sigh, she turned back toward her booth.

Hadley found Suzanne collecting money from a jam customer. Thanking the customer, Suze glanced up at Hadley, shading her eyes from the afternoon sun.

"Get everything?"

Grumbling a little, Hadley shook her head. "Did you hear anything about Luke Fenton coming to town for the weekend?"

"Erm …" Suze chewed on her bottom lip and looked away.

Hadley lowered her voice. "Suzanne Michelle Till."

"Okay, okay." She put up her hands in defeat. "Sit down." Motioning to the empty chair next to her, Suzanne waited.

Reluctantly, Hadley plopped herself down in the seat, setting her bags on the grass next to her. "What aren't you telling me?"

Cringing, Suze blurted out, "Luke is moving back to Stoneybrook for good according to Hazel Smith, everyone I talked to at Seven Stones, and his sister."

For the past ten years, Luke had been living four hours south of the Cascade River Valley in Seattle, building his plant-focused tech company, GroWorks. And while she and Luke had been close growing up, they'd had a falling-out when she'd started dating Tyler in high school—namely Luke trying to talk Tyler out of dating Hadley, saying she wasn't good enough for his best friend.

So, even though Luke hadn't been in town for the divorce a few months ago, Hadley didn't need a map to figure out whose side he would be on.

"But …" Hadley wrinkled her nose. "His business."

"Apparently it's going so well that he's decided to come back and put some of the tech to use helping Fenton Farm."

“Ha!” Hadley let out a wry laugh. “Good luck to him with that. I heard his dad ranting to Hal last week about how sprinklers were technically cheating, and a real farmer should be able to get the job done between the river and rain.”

“Yeah, Jolee told me their parents have already said no to half the gadgets he brought over with him.”

“Where is he staying?” Hadley asked. She couldn’t see the successful Seattle businessman moving back into the farmhouse with his parents. Even his sister lived off-site, in town, and commuted the five minutes to the farm every morning.

“The old tenant quarters, I think,” Suze said. “But don’t quote me on that.”

Hadley pursed her lips to one side as she thought of the old farmhouse down the road from Edith’s. Luke Fenton back in town. She sighed. As if there weren’t already enough people she had to avoid.

“Isn’t it weird that Tyler just moved to the city and Luke moves back home?” Hadley asked. She’d been sure part of the reason Tyler wanted to move to Seattle was to be close to Luke—well, and a few other reasons she’d rather not think about.

Suze remained silent, but raised an eyebrow at Hadley, knowing Seattle had been one of the major reasons she’d gotten divorced, not because Hadley refused to move with Tyler, but because of what he’d been doing there without her.

Hadley shrugged. “Never mind them. Luke and Tyler can do whatever they want. We’re going to focus on ourselves and our businesses.”

Smiling, Suze said, “To the year of Suzely.” She squinted. “Hadlanne?”

Hadley laughed. “We’d make an awful celebrity couple.”

❧

By the end of the market an hour later, Hadley only had a few jars of jam left to pack back to the kitchen.

Normally, she and Suze would linger, chatting with the other vendors and soaking up the sun. But today, all Hadley wanted to do was get out of the spotlight, away from the whispers and prying eyes. The stares today reminded her too much of the attention she’d gotten during her divorce.

Even though she told herself that she was moving past it all, Hadley obviously still had some emotional trauma over the event. The town hadn’t gone so far as to wear colored pins to show their support

of either her or Tyler, but it had been close enough.

Months later, the effects were still noticeable. For example, Hadley only got lattes at Cascade River Coffee now because Tyler's Aunt Sharon owned The Beanery on Main Street. She also didn't dare set foot in the Stoneybrook Creamery, the ice cream parlor Tyler's cousin Jeff ran. Coffee and ice cream weren't the end of the world—goodness knew her waistline benefitted from at least one of those absences—but the grocery store was beginning to pose a problem, as was made evident by today's events.

Just as she was breaking down her folding table, Hadley spotted Paul walking toward her from the parking lot. After all of the suspicious glances she'd gotten, Hadley couldn't have been happier to see her twin brother's face, even grim as it was after the day he'd no doubt had.

"Hey," she called to him. Then, worrying he might be there to take Ansel from her, she said, "The cat's in my office back at the kitchen. What's up?"

Running his palm across his thick beard, he said, "I don't need Ansel yet. It's just been a long day. Thought I'd check in and see how you're doing." The way her brother's eyes flicked around the park made Hadley sure that wasn't the whole truth.

She knew every possible sign that Paul was lying or hiding something, just like she knew every single one of his laughs. If he wouldn't meet her gaze, he was keeping something from her. His left eye twitching meant he was full-on lying. And if he rubbed his left arm with his right hand, she knew he was going to tell her something, but just wasn't ready yet.

Looking past Hadley, toward the produce stands, Paul rubbed his left arm. Hadley's shoulders settled and she sighed, knowing she'd just have to wait for the information, whatever it was. When he raised a hand in a wave, Hadley turned to see who he was saying hi to.

Her stomach dropped as she recognized Luke Fenton heading their way.

"Pa-ul," she hissed between clenched teeth.

Her brother shrugged.

"The fact that you are still friends with him is my least favorite part of you," she whispered as Luke approached.

"We're not friends, exactly," Paul said. "But I'm not going to shun the guy over something he did when he was a stupid teenager."

Hadley sighed, wishing she felt the same way, wishing she could let it go.

Suze must've seen Luke approaching because she abandoned her packing up and was standing by Hadley's side just as Luke stopped in front of them.

“Suzanne. Paul,” Luke said, with a dip of his head. “Babe,” he added, a smirk pulling at the corners of his mouth.

Hadley’s cheeks grew hot despite the cool air coming off the river. She *hated* that nickname. Unable to remember who’d come up with it in high school, it had the same effect on her mood now as it had over a decade earlier. It had all stemmed from the fact that she and Paul didn’t look like twins.

They’d been much “twinnier” growing up. But once Paul hit a growth spurt in high school, everything had changed.

And then senior year had brought *the beard,* and her brother began to resemble the mythical Paul Bunyan—or at least their classmates had thought so. Because they were always together, everyone started calling Hadley Babe, after the blue ox who acted as the lumberjack’s sidekick.

“It’s a compliment,” Luke said, bumping his shoulder into hers.

Suze and Hadley scoffed at the same time.

“Right. I’ve always wanted to be referred to as a giant, blue, glorified cow.” She rolled her eyes.

“Oxen, actually.” Luke crossed his arms over his chest.

Hadley placed her hands on either side of a box of jam. “Sorry, but we were just about to leave.”

“So is it true? About Edith?” he asked. Annoying as he was, Luke wasn’t stupid. He looked to Suze and Hadley for an answer, knowing Paul would have to be tight-lipped about anything official.

Hadley sighed, but nodded. Even Luke deserved to know the truth. Especially since he and Mrs. Butler had technically been neighbors for the few days he’d been back in town.

“I hate to say it, but I’m almost glad she’s gone.” Luke grimaced at his statement, putting up his hands in a gesture of defense. “I mean, not that I wanted her to die, it’s just that maybe now Dirk Croft will stop blocking the driveway easement with his BMW. I was getting to the point where I was seriously considering running right over it with my truck.”

Her forehead crinkling together, Suze asked, “What was Dirk doing over at Edith’s place?”

“I’m guessing he was trying to convince her to sell her property so they can go forward with the golf course,” Luke answered.

Hadley remembered seeing the anti-golf course flyers sitting on Mrs. Butler’s counter that morning.

“I didn’t know Dirk was behind the plans for the golf course,” Suze said.

Luke shrugged. “He must’ve been. I swear he was at her house every day, harassing her. I could hear them yelling through the trees a few days ago.”

“Yikes,” Hadley said, looking at the grass, then up at Paul. “How’d the rest of it go with M&M?”

Paul’s jaw tightened for a moment. “So well I don’t want to talk about it.” It was amazing anything could drip from his dry words, but sarcasm definitely did.

“That sad excuse for a sheriff is still around?” Luke shook his head. “I was hoping you guys would’ve gotten rid of him while I was gone.”

The three of them sighed and answered all at once.

“No luck.”

“Still here.”

“Yup.”

“Some things never change, I suppose,” Luke said, then grinned at Hadley. “Speaking of … where are your folks?” He looked between Paul and Hadley. “Haven’t seen them around since I’ve been back.”

Hadley felt her heart ache as a wave of missing her mom and dad washed over her. She knew they’d be back as soon as Gran was in a more stable condition, but she still couldn’t help the emotion that seemed to clog her throat.

Thankfully, Paul answered for the both of them. “Our grandpa passed away last month, and they’ve gone to stay with Gran in Oregon until she’s got her feet under her again. The house was in bad shape since Grandpa had been sick for so long, and Gran had her hands full taking care of him. Dad’s doing a lot of the work around the place. Mom took a leave from school until further notice.”

Hadley tried to smile one of those encouraging smiles she always saw people put on when they were trying to be strong. She was proud of her parents for being there for Gran. It was just harder than she thought it would be to have them so far away.

Luke seemed to recognize Hadley’s feelings, because his eyes held on to her, and it looked like he wanted to give her a hug. Instead, he said, “Well, I’d better get back to pack up.”

Before Hadley could even begin to ponder what that was all about, he turned to leave.

The confusion Hadley felt quickly dissipated as she lost herself in packing up as well. Then she, Suze, and Paul walked the supplies back to the Jam Van. She was ready to go home and curl up with a glass of wine on her cozy couch. It had been a long day.

“Wait.” Hadley stopped steps away from the van. “What am I doing with Ansel?”

Paul stopped as well. “I spoke with Edith’s sister this morning and asked if she wanted to take him. She told me she’s extremely allergic to cats and that’s why Edith always came to visit her, not ever the other way around.”

“Allergic?” Hadley asked, perking up. “So …?”

Paul smiled. “So … if you wouldn’t mind hanging on to him until we can figure out what else to do, I would really appreciate it.”

Suze scoffed. “I think you’ll have to twist her arm to get her to agree to that,” she said dryly.

Hadley’s shoulders tugged up in excitement. And while she knew she shouldn’t get attached to the little cat, Hadley couldn’t help the flutter of hope in her stomach.

It was such a welcome feeling on what had been such a taxing, terrible day.

6

After dropping her market supplies back at the kitchen and picking up Ansel, Hadley headed home. From the first moment he set paws inside, that cat walked around her home as if he'd lived there his whole life. Granted, she and Edith had a similar taste for soft furniture adorned with bright, fuzzy pillows and blankets, but Hadley had still expected him to need a tad more time to adjust.

As it was, she wasn't about to complain.

"I can't believe I've gone this long without having a pet." Hadley smiled as she gently touched the tip of her pointer finger to his pink nose from where he was curled up in her lap.

The cat blinked his amber eyes at her contentedly. But a second later, those same eyes went wide with terror as a heavy knock sounded at the front door. Ansel darted off Hadley's lap and crouched under her end table as she stood and went to see who was knocking.

Hadley was delighted to see a bottle of local wine, a bag of lemons, and a pint of her favorite ice cream from the Stoneybrook Creamery: Peanut Butter Cup Blast. Suzanne's rosy face peeked out from behind them.

"Hey, what's this for?" Hadley asked, stepping back to let her inside.

Suze wrinkled her face into a frown. "I feel awful about not telling you about Luke being in town." She tromped into the kitchen, setting down the items to grab a couple of wine glasses. She wasted no time opening the bottle and pouring a good amount of wine in each glass. "I seriously was going to tell you this morning at the jam kitchen, but then you had Ansel and told me all about Edith and … I decided the news could wait. I had *no* idea he would decide to show up at the farmers market—honestly."

Hadley nodded. Luke famously—or more like infamously, if you asked her—disliked the market, and before his move to Seattle could only be found there on threat of death.

Gladly accepting the glass of wine, Hadley clinked hers with Suzanne's in cheers. "Honestly, it's okay. I didn't mean to make you feel bad about it. Sorry, I've been super off today with everything."

"I have to admit, this isn't just an apology. It's also just me trying

to take care of my best friend. I saw your list. You needed lemons, but didn't get them because of Luke. And, well, when doesn't a person need ice cream?" Suze looked down at the container and then blinked up at Hadley innocently.

"Thanks." Hadley sighed. "I appreciate it. But I'm seriously okay." She crossed her arms as her friend settled into a chair on the other side of the kitchen island.

"My best friend breaks it off with her husband and hasn't told more than four people the actual reason? I'm sorry, but that's not okay. And then his best buddy moves back to town on top of you finding a dead body? Hadley, we've known each other since we were four; get used to the fact that I can read you like one of those raggedy old recipes you have from Granny Viv."

While she smiled at her friend's bluntness, it faded quickly as she realized her friend was right. "Okay, I may be a little overwhelmed."

Suze chuckled. "A little?"

"Or a lot." Hadley snorted. "It's stupid, I know, but having to deal with Tara today threw me off more than I want to admit. I feel like my town, the town I've grown up in, that I love, isn't mine anymore. It isn't as happy, or safe, or kind now that I 'ran off' their golden boy." Hadley used air quotes around "ran off," highlighting the biggest problem with keeping the real reason for their divorce a secret; everyone blamed her for the end of their marriage since she'd been the one to file.

They'd been Tyler and Hadley, after all. High school sweethearts, student-body president and star quarterback, homecoming king and queen—the perfect couple. Or so they appeared.

"Don't you think it would be so much easier if you just told people why you left him?" Suze asked.

"If Tyler decides he wants to, that's his decision, but I've been the butt of too much gossip lately to willingly put someone else through it," Hadley said, taking a sip of her wine. "Plus, if I came out with it now, you know the story would get twisted up worse than Barry's old oak tree."

Suze scooted onto one of the bar stools sitting around the island and rested her head on her fists. "Yeah."

"It's okay. I'm fine—or I'm getting there."

It hadn't taken Hadley asking for a divorce to realize she'd been unhappy—she'd known that for years, maybe since they'd gotten together, if she was being honest—but their divorce had helped her identify what had kept her in an unhappy relationship for so long. And ever since, Hadley had been working on her tendency to put herself second in an effort to keep everyone around her happy. She picked at the nail polish left on her fingernails as she thought.

Suze glanced at Hadley's polish. "Days or hours?" she asked.

Wrinkling her nose, Hadley answered. "Last night, so *technically* a day."

"Doesn't count." Suze shook her head. "Why do you even paint them when you know you're going to chip it off?"

Hadley shrugged. "Gives me something to do. I also think it looks better."

Leaning forward, Suze grabbed Hadley's hand and showed her the chipped disasters that were her fingernails. "Better? That does not look better."

"I had a stressful day," Hadley answered pulling her hand back and setting it in her lap.

Suze groaned. "At least you didn't have to deal with Dirk. He came by my booth while you were out, wanting a new logo for Croft Development. Said he was making some changes to the company."

"He hasn't changed that logo since we were kids." Hadley's forehead wrinkled. "I wonder what's spurred that on?"

Suze simply shrugged and began dishing up the ice cream.

Ansel slipped out from his hiding spot under the end table, having decided Suzanne was not a threat, and he threaded his body around the legs of her chair.

"It'll get better," Suze said. "People will forget, and get over it. Even with Luke back in town …" Suze paused and then tipped her head to one side. "Do you think Luke knows what Tyler did?"

"He has to. Those two have been inseparable since forever."

Thinking of Luke made Hadley's chest clench tight with anger. At one point, she would've said he was just as much her friend as he was Tyler's, but that had all changed in high school. And now they were grown up. Completely different people.

Ansel moved over to rub and purr around Hadley's legs. She bent to pick him up and stroked his soft fur. Between the way he relaxed in her arms and the white noise of his purring, the cat served to calm her from the slightly agitated state she'd gotten herself in thinking about her failed marriage to her high school sweetheart.

Suzanne pushed aside the ice cream. "Now that we're talking about Tyler, I'm regretting buying some of his cousin's ice cream."

Hadley scoffed. "Oh, I'm not." She set Ansel down on the floor so she could pull two spoons from the drawer and stuck them into the bowls Suze had dished up. "After being married to one of the Henleys, I'd become dependent on their ice cream. Going these months without it has been like torture."

Suze laughed and sunk her spoon into the delicious soft-serve after Hadley. They popped a spoonful each into their mouths and both closed their eyes, letting out groans of appreciation.

“I don’t even care if they spit in it.” Suze scooped a second spoonful out.

Hadley laughed. “Yeah, I’m surprised they even let you inside.”

“There were glares.” She nodded. “And the service was definitely subpar, but I’d do anything for my best friend, you know.”

“As would I for you.”

Suze paused. “There is one thing you can do for me, actually.”

Eyebrows raising, Hadley asked, “What’s that?”

“Tell me I was right.”

“Okay, you were right. About what?”

She cleared her throat. “You’ve never thanked me for convincing you to keep your maiden name when you got married.”

Hadley sighed. “Oh, that?”

Suze had been adamant, along with most of the town, that Hadley Henley was not a flattering name. Tyler hadn’t cared either way—saying in such a small town, everyone was going to know they were married anyway—so she’d stayed a James, rather than hyphenating.

“Psh.” Suze scoffed. “That? I saved you from a major headache. You would be having to redo your business license and change back right now, on top of everything else.”

Hadley put a hand up. “You’re right. You’re a very good friend. Thank you.”

Suze beamed.

They finished off the small container of ice cream in a matter of minutes. Then, after refreshing their wine glasses, they headed into the small sitting room which held Hadley’s favorite view of all: a straight shot of the North Cascades mountains. Her house had tall windows, great natural light, and even better views, all musts in Hadley’s book, but it also held too many memories of the years she’d been married to Tyler. She welcomed company to keep her mind off those thoughts.

The women settled onto opposite sides of Hadley’s tweed couch as they watched the sun dip below the mountaintops, tossing reds, oranges, and purples out into the sky in some last-ditch effort for attention. Ansel jumped onto Hadley’s lap, curling up within seconds as if they did this every night. She smiled.

“Luke looks good, huh?” Suze asked in the silence.

Hadley’s smile fell flat. “I hadn’t noticed.”

She had.

While Tyler had been the tall, dark, and devilishly handsome type—literally, the guy was as bad boy as Stoneybrook got and the mastermind of most of their worst decisions growing up—Luke had always been solid. He was shorter than Tyler, his sandy blond hair always a mess and his strong arms reflecting his farm-centric

upbringing. He had also been the pragmatic one, the person who cleaned up when everyone else had left a party, and the person who checked to make sure everyone got home safely after all the shenanigans.

As frustrating as she found the man, her soul couldn't seem to throw away their time growing up. There had been a long time when Luke had been as important to Hadley as her brother and Suze were. They'd spent summer nights lying out in the wheat field staring up at the stars while they caught fireflies, and spring days racing bikes down the dirt road, neck and neck for second place when Paul had obviously already won first. Luke was the one who always dared her to do things she didn't think she could—like jump into the river from Dari's rock.

But he'd changed as they grew up. It hadn't just been the betrayal of him urging Tyler not to ask Hadley out. By their senior year, he'd turned his back on Stoneybrook completely, telling anyone who would listen how excited he was to leave for college and never come back.

Suze shot a sidelong glance at Hadley from her end of the couch, and Hadley realized she must've been silent for too long, looking contemplative.

"Looking good or not, Luke's still Tyler's best friend," Hadley said in summation. "And he's probably even harder to be around now that he's spent so many years in the city. Next thing we know, he'll probably want to move to Cascade Ridge because it just fits his *new urban lifestyle* so much better."

Cascade Ridge residents had a way of making Stoneybrookians feel like hicks, like country bumpkins, even though they weren't. The inhabitants of the larger city to the north all seemed to be the kind of people who never ate in their cars. When they wore white it was as bright as the day they'd bought it, and Hadley doubted their shoes smelled of anything but expensive leather.

"Not what you thought in sixth grade when he was your first kiss," Suze said under her breath, but at a volume she knew Hadley would hear.

Hadley huffed and tossed a pillow at her, waking Ansel with the commotion. "That's not fair."

"Hey, watch the wine, lady. And it is fair."

"We were in sixth grade. I also used to wear overalls every day in sixth grade, and you don't see me doing that anymore."

"Not *every* day." Suzanne tipped her head to the side, but couldn't hold back the teasing grin that curled across her face.

They spent the rest of the night talking, laughing, and forgetting the terrible morning Hadley had experienced finding Edith. It was the first time that day that she began to let go and put the woman's death

behind her for good. Or so she thought.

7

The next two days flew by in a blur of house cleaning, yard work, and canning. Running her own business often meant working through the weekends, but Hadley tried to keep that at a minimum during spring and summer.

This spring had brought forth the usual fresh green stalks, leaves, and weeds shooting out all over her garden beds. She needed to get on top of the weeding or it could easily get out of control.

There was also Ansel to take care of. While he didn't take much work, Hadley enjoyed spoiling him with belly scratches and treats. He was obviously used to an owner who worked a lot—Edith only had Louise to help her cover the knitting shop, so she had worked most days—because when Hadley came home after working the jam kitchen most of Monday, he was sleeping happily in a sunbeam on the rug in the living room.

Ansel slunk around underneath Hadley's purple and red rhodies while she finished up the last bit of weeding left over from the weekend.

It had been two months since Tyler moved out, and Hadley was beginning to enjoy the whole living-alone thing. In fact, she liked the liberty to follow her own whims and schedule. But having Ansel around seemed to enhance every part of her day.

At night, he would curl up next to her feet on the top of her duvet, the rhythmic sound of his purring lulling her to sleep. He greeted her with short, happy mews in the morning, rubbing against her arms to let her know it was time to feed him. Everywhere she went, Ansel would follow.

And while she was sad to leave him in the morning on Tuesday as she headed out for the kitchen, she knew he'd be much happier having the run of the house than he would be locked in her office all day.

Hadley's bike was damp with morning dew. She swiped her hand across the seat so her pants wouldn't soak up all of the liquid then clipped on her helmet. The breeze was cold as she took off down her road. The surrounding mountains still had a fair bit of snow capping their peaks, and she knew it would be a couple months still until it was warm enough to go without a jacket in the mornings and

evenings. The sweet, mulchy smell of fresh cut grass swirled on the wind as she turned from the rocky country road onto the paved one that would take her into town.

She waved to a few gardening, glove-clad neighbors who looked up as she passed by. Eyeing the road to Edith's place, Hadley felt a chill skitter down her spine. Her weekend chores had helped her forget as well as she could, but seeing the entrance to Edith's long road, she couldn't help the curiosity that returned.

Her hands tilted the handlebars of her bike to the right and down her road as if of their own accord. The tires bumped over the gravel drive for a few seconds, but then smoothed out as the road evened out.

Besides the access to the Fenton's old tenant house, no one drove down this way except Edith. Which was why Hadley was surprised to see two cars parked in front of the yellow house when she pulled up. Correction: not just any two cars, but her brother's truck and Kevin's cruiser.

They were standing in the front yard talking, hands held up to their eyes to shield them from the spring morning sunshine. Yellow tape still ran along the porch, barring the entrance to anyone outside the sheriff's department. Paul glanced up as he noticed her.

Kevin headed inside the house as Paul walked up to meet Hadley. She could read her twin brother's body language like her favorite recipes, and she could tell by the way he set his jaw and wouldn't meet her gaze that he was hiding something.

"Hey?" His one-word question held a handful more inside it. *What are you doing here? What do you want? Can't you see I'm busy?*

"Morning." Hadley's response held answers to all of his questions. *I'm surprised to see you here too. And now I'm curious about what's going on. Tell me what you're doing.*

They stared at each other for a few seconds before Hadley broke down and said, "I kept thinking about her. I just thought I'd ride by on my way into town. Why do you guys still have the tape up?"

Paul looked out over the Fenton's farmland. The songbirds in the nearby trees layered different tunes together to create a beautiful symphony. But none of it did anything to calm Hadley's worries.

"Paul?" she asked, pulling his attention back to her. "I can see the tape. Come on, spill."

Blinking, he said, "McKay called down this morning …"

"Back in Cascade Ridge already?" Hadley tsked. "The man barely lasted the weekend."

Normally, Paul loved trading verbal cuts at the expense of his ornery boss, but today he didn't even smile.

"Okay. Seriously, man. What's going on?"

Paul swallowed. “Edith didn’t die of natural causes,” he said, finally.

Hadley’s lips parted. A surprised gasp escaped them. “What? How?” She shook her head as if that might take away the ringing in her ears.

“Her autopsy showed that she died of an overdose of blood pressure medication.”

Her hand covered her mouth as she took in the news. “So it could’ve been …” Hadley gulped. “Suicide?”

She couldn’t imagine Edith Butler doing anything of the sort, but sometimes it was hard to know what other people were going through.

Paul’s jaw clenched for a split second. “No. I mean, we can’t write off the possibility, but we don’t believe that’s what happened. There were traces of the medication in her empty tea cup. If she was trying to kill herself, she would’ve just swallowed the pills rather than dissolving them into her tea.”

Feeling her shoulders slump with relief, Hadley let out the breath she’d sucked in moments ago. But any solace was short-lived as she realized what this meant.

“So there could be a murderer in Stoneybrook?”

Even the sentence felt oxymoronic coming from her lips. Stoneybrook was a place where people came to forget their hectic lives, where everyone knew their neighbors, and no one locked their car doors. It wasn’t a place where people looked over their shoulders or worried about things like crime and murder.

Did people have grudges? Fights? Sure. But Stoneybrook had always solved disputes the old-fashioned ways through rumors, gossip, the silent treatment, taking sides, and unrelenting passive-aggressive behavior. Her own experience in the last year was a testament to that.

People in Hadley’s town didn’t go around killing people.

She put a hand on Edith’s white picket fence to steady herself. Suddenly the Saturday market came to mind, how oddly some of the people had dealt with the news of Edith’s death.

“This sure sheds a whole different light on the way people acted at the market.”

Paul wrinkled his forehead. “How so?”

Hadley recounted how Louise had been a little too aloof about her boss being found dead and how Hazel had been entirely too sweet.

“Then there was the fact that Dirk and Cathy Croft showed up. I haven’t seen them at a market for years. Suze said he’s trying to rebrand Croft Development.”

“Huh,” Paul said as he rubbed his hand across his bearded chin. “Sounds like something I need to look into. You know, her sister did

say something I didn't think was weird until now."

His statement made Hadley lean closer in anticipation.

"I asked her if Edith had mentioned anything about how she was feeling when they'd talked about her coming out to visit. The sister said no, that Edith reported feeling just fine. But she did say that she was excited to get out of town for a while, that she kept saying something from her past was bothering her."

"Hmm … and she didn't say what … or whom?" Hadley watched her brother.

"Nope. I'll put it on my list to call her and see if she knows anything more." Paul seemed lost in his thoughts for a moment, but then he focused back on Hadley. "To be honest, Had, I need to figure this out. McKay has been on me the last few days, picking apart everything I'm doing. He keeps saying his nephew is graduating from the academy next month and how much better of a job he'd do. He thinks the fact that I grew up here is negatively affecting my ability to do my job. I need something big, and catching a killer, if that's what we're dealing with, would be it."

Chewing on her bottom lip out of worry as she listened to her brother, Hadley nodded. As much as they made fun of Sheriff M&M, he was Paul's boss and therefore held her brother's career in his hands.

"Sure, Suze and I can ask around. We'll help you figure this out. Don't worry."

Paul shook his head. "No way you're getting involved with a murder investigation."

Hadley almost moved her hand from the fence to her hip in defiance, but instead she clenched the painted wood slat. She knew it would be no use arguing with her brother over this. It was his job, after all.

Hadley put her hands up. "Okay. Gotcha. Well, I'll let you get back to work. I've got to get to making some jam."

Plus, she thought to herself*, I can't help it if I happen to hear things around town that might be helpful in his investigation*.

Before Paul could say anything in return, Hadley waved and hopped on her bike, heading back toward town, and hopefully, some answers.

Hadley's mind buzzed with the news of Edith's not-so-natural death on her bike ride into town. Suspects and questions made it almost hard to focus on the road, something that became important as she turned onto Main Street. Downtown was hopping, even though it was barely nine in the morning.

While Stoneybrook was a tourist destination all year long, visitor numbers grew exponentially during the spring and summer months.

Between the cute, brick buildings with their multicolored-striped awnings, the artisan shops, and the kind locals, the small river valley town was a favorite vacation spot. There was an abundance of bed-and-breakfasts in town and a few out on the edges of the farmland or sitting right on the banks of the Cascade River. Visitors often had a hard time choosing between the many local hikes, rafting down the river, farm or winery tours, horseback riding through the valley, or just spending the day getting some good ol' retail therapy.

Hadley smiled thinking about her goal to open a small storefront where she could sell her jams from here instead of just relying on her farmers market sales and online orders.

While she'd hoped to have a retail space right away when she started renting the kitchen, there had been some complications with … well, Tyler. But Hadley was over blaming him for everything. Within the next few months, she should be at a place where she could renovate the front part of the space—currently used for extra dry storage—into a retail area. She already had Suze on standby, thinking of merchandise ideas to add to her inventory.

Pulling into the alley behind her building, Hadley took off her helmet and hooked it on the bike handle as she engaged the kickstand. As she walked inside, her gaze settled on the three large arrangements that she got each week from Valley Wildflowers to display in her front windows. Hadley pulled in a deep breath, loving the tart, sweet smell that always seemed to permeate her kitchen.

Speaking of tart, she thought and snapped her fingers, *I forgot to grab the bag of lemons Suze brought me the other day*.

The bag was still sitting on her kitchen counter. Luckily, she still had a bowl full of lemons, but that would only get her through the batches she was going to make today. Hadley liked to structure her workdays with jam cooking and canning time in the mornings and then fielding online orders, packing, and shipping in the afternoons.

Today, she was working on replenishing her supply of one of her favorites—strawberry rhubarb. It had been a big hit, and she knew the rest of what she had would be gone by the time she sent orders out at the end of the day. Getting right to the task at hand, she started her prep work, pulling out bowls to measure the ingredients, then washing the berries, and chopping the rhubarb.

While the berries were marinating in the sugar, she pulled out one of her large copper pots. Her heart fluttered each time she looked at the bright, metallic pots. Sure they'd been an expensive investment, but she couldn't imagine using anything else at this point, believing wholeheartedly that their ability to heat evenly without getting too hot was part of the secret to her success.

The pots she used, or as some jammers called them—kettles—were

big, but they were still small enough for her jams to be considered small batch. No matter how overwhelming her orders became, she preferred the small-batch option, feeling like the few times she'd tried to do anything on a larger scale, the jam seemed to lose some of its character or adopt a rubbery quality.

Hadley quickly lost herself in the cooking and canning process. A few hours later, when she was all cleaned up, she sighed and watched the people passing by her window for a moment. Not only was she ready for a break, but it was about time she started to do a little more digging about Edith around town.

8

Hadley swiped a towel over her clean work counter one more time and then pulled out her phone. If she was going to do any digging for information, she would need her sidekick. She texted Suze.

Coffee?

Suzanne answered back almost immediately. She didn't type any words, just sent an emoji of a person running and then a cup of coffee.

Hadley laughed and grabbed her purse. A minute later, Suzanne peered in the jam kitchen's front window and waved. Hadley met her outside, locking the front door behind her.

"Hey," Hadley said.

"Hey." Suze yawned.

The woman had probably just gotten to work, which meant she had only rolled out of bed a good half hour earlier. Suze always said her most creative times were right after lunch and then right around midnight, so she was often up late. She usually arrived at her downtown studio closer to lunchtime each day, needing to sleep in when she had a late-night creativity session.

"You make any stops before the studio this morning?" Hadley asked as they walked down the street toward the café.

Suze shook her head. "Why?"

"Just wondered if you'd heard anything unusual." Hadley looked around to make sure no one was within earshot. "Paul says Edith's death was most likely murder."

Suze stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. "Murder?" she whispered the question, eyes wide with worry.

Hadley nodded, but hooked her arm through Suze's and kept walking, pulling her friend with her.

"Yeesh." Suze stared ahead, almost appearing catatonic as they walked down the street. "A murderer in Stoneybrook."

"I know, it's …" Hadley shivered. "If anyone other than Paul had told me, I'm not sure I would've believed them."

The two women weaved in and out of tourists walking slowly as they window shopped or paused, deciding which stores to go inside. They had no idea there might be a murderer in their midst.

Spring flowers bloomed, bursting in color and scent from the large

wine-barrel planters dotted along the Main Street sidewalk. For the first time in her life, Hadley felt as though their cute town was a lie, that these colorful planters and bright buildings were just covering up a darkness no one could've imagined.

Stoneybrook's Cascade River Coffee came into view on their right. The light brown color of the building always looked like a toasted marshmallow to Hadley, making her mouth water at the thought of the homemade syrups the owner, Wendy, made for her signature lattes.

Surely all Hadley needed was a coffee to make the world seem a little brighter.

As they pulled the door open and walked inside, both Hadley and Suzanne closed their eyes and sighed. The smells were some of the best in town. Between the sweet-cream smell of steamed milk and the bitter, roasted scent of the coffee beans, the café smelled like heaven —or at least, what Hadley hoped it might smell like.

Wendy glanced up from her espresso machine, steam rising in a cloud in front of her while the screech of the steamer faded as she turned the knob all the way off. Tapping the metal cup so the foam would move to the top, she poured it into a mug, swirling and zigzagging the milk so it would make a beautiful design as it mixed with the dark, buttery shots of coffee.

"Hey!" Wendy called. "What can I get you two?" She handed a customer the drink she'd been working on and then wiped her hands on her apron, turning to face Suze and Hadley.

"I'll have a twenty-ounce vanilla latte, please," Hadley ordered.

"Make that two." Suze smiled.

Wendy nodded and got to work. Even though a vanilla latte sounded plain, Wendy's version of the drink was anything but. Between the expertly roasted coffee beans that she imported from a guy named Miguel and the vanilla syrup she made right in her kitchen —she infused cinnamon and cardamom in with the vanilla beans— even the plainest of drinks felt like a decadent treat.

They also ordered two beautiful scones with clotted cream and a small serving of Hadley's own jam—Wendy was a loyal customer and often sent business Hadley's way when customers tasted the jam and wanted more.

After paying and grabbing their orders, the women headed outside onto the large back porch. Like the rest of the businesses this far down on Main Street, the coffeehouse's backyard was the rushing river. Between the sunshine, the looming mountains, and the cool comfort provided by the water, the porch was a prime destination for locals and tourists alike.

While the bottom section was crowded, almost every table

occupied, Hadley took a quick turn to the right and scaled a small wiry staircase that hugged the building and led up to another section of rooftop seating only the locals knew about. If they were going to get information, they needed someone who lived here.

Hadley sighed in defeat as she noticed Mr. and Mrs. Ambler were the only other customers occupying the rooftop. Living on the edge of town with their young children, they were two of the least gossipy locals Hadley knew. Knowing the Amblers would probably not even know Edith was dead yet, Hadley waved and then chose the table farthest from the couple.

"So how did Edith die?" Suze asked, leaning forward.

Hadley explained what Paul had told her about the autopsy results from Sheriff M&M.

"Who does he think could've done it?" Suze took a sip of her latte, and before Hadley could answer, said, "After the way Louise reacted at the market, she's gotta be on the short list, right?"

"Paul didn't say anything about suspects yet." Hadley paused to think. "If Louise did kill Edith, that seems silly for her to go around saying things like that. It would point right to her as a person of interest."

"Maybe that's what she's counting on, that it's too obvious so we'll think it couldn't be her."

"Maybe." Hadley shrugged. "Or she didn't count on anyone finding out it was murder."

"Did anyone else have a problem with Edith?" Just after asking it, Suze shook her head. "Sorry, that's a dumb question."

"There aren't many people more unliked in town."

"Not unless you're talking about Dirk Croft."

Hadley's eyebrows lifted at her mention of the disagreeable man. "He and Cathy *were* uncharacteristically present at the market the other day."

"Yeah, that was weird."

"Thea Clark seemed to think they were there to find out the gossip about Edith."

"Makes sense."

"Or he could've been there specifically to show his face so he wouldn't look guilty."

Suze leaned closer. "Luke did say he's seen Dirk at Edith's place a lot lately, and that they were fighting."

"If Edith was out of the way, maybe he'd be able to get a hold of her land for that golf course."

"True." Suze took another sip of her coffee then a bite of her scone.

"Hazel Smith also makes the list, in my mind."

"I hate to admit it, but I think you're right. After all of that stuff

last year with Robert." Suze widened her eyes dramatically. "That was a mess."

Hadley agreed. "But why would Hazel wait all of this time to do something about it? It was last year. If she was going to get revenge, wouldn't she have done it right away?"

"Maybe she waited so she would be a less likely suspect."

Sighing, Hadley ate more of her scone and looked out at the river.

"And then there are all of the other people who Edith's rubbed the wrong way throughout the years with her nosy, know-it-all ways," Suze added.

"Not to mention people who don't live here, though anyone who didn't live around Edith would definitely have less motive."

"True." Suze nodded. "Nor would they know about her blood pressure meds."

Hadley softened her features as she remembered Paul's question about the front door. She hated that she hadn't stopped to check whether or not the door had been locked. That certainly would've given them a clue as to whether the killer had known the victim or not.

About to ask if Suze had heard anything more about Dirk's company rebrand, Hadley stopped herself when her friend glanced over at the stairway leading up to the rooftop. Turning to look, Hadley watched as Tyler's Aunt Mickie finished scaling the stairs and caught sight of her.

Surprise pushed Hadley out of her seat. When it came to Tyler's family these days, that normally would've meant she was getting up to run the other direction. But it was different with Mickie. Mickie was the big sister she never had. Tyler's young aunt was only fifteen years older than Hadley, and they had hit it off the moment they'd become family.

In fact, Hadley had played a big part in convincing Mickie to move here from Cascade Ridge about five years ago.

"Hey you!" Mickie walked forward, enveloping Hadley in a tight hug. "I was dropping off an order, and Wendy told me you were up here, so I thought I'd come say hi. It's been a minute, hasn't it?"

Hadley pulled back from the hug after a second. "I know. Sorry."

Mickie shrugged. "I'm the one who left for a few weeks."

"I know, but I've been meaning to catch up and just haven't had a moment," Hadley said.

"Don't worry about it." Mickie smiled, then waved at Suzanne as she noticed her. Her attention landed on their half-eaten scones. "What do you think of those?" She pointed.

"Better than ever," Hadley said.

"The perfect complement to Had's jam, as always," Suze added.

“Oh good. I added a pinch of ginger to this batch, but I wanted to make sure it wasn’t overpowering.”

Suzanne’s eyes widened. “Okay, that’s what I’m tasting. It’s lovely.”

Mickie was the best baker in Stoneybrook, in Hadley’s opinion. She’d had to fight tooth and nail for purchase in the baked-goods retail market up in Cascade Ridge—going up against giant chain bakeries as well as a slew of local shops. It was that fact that caused Hadley to urge her to move down south to the smaller town, especially since Glenda, the town baker, had just closed her shop to move to Arizona with her grandchildren.

Once Mickie’s shop had opened, she’d been an instant hit.

Mickie put her hand on her hip as she studied Hadley. “How’ve you been, doll?”

“Okay.” Hadley smiled, trying to appear more okay than she felt. She wasn’t sure why, though. Mickie could read Hadley almost as well as Paul and Suze could at this point in their friendship.

“Huh, weird since I heard you stumbled on a dead body a few days ago, and if I had done the same thing I most definitely wouldn’t be *okay*.”

Hadley wrinkled her nose.

Mickie continued. “Not to mention hearing Luke is moving back in town.”

“Right.” Hadley sucked in a long breath through her teeth.

“That’s probably the last thing you need.” Mickie shook her head slowly.

Hadley agreed, but didn’t know what she could do about it. Luke was free to move wherever he wanted, whenever he wanted.

Mickie checked her watch. “Well, I’d better go. I only had a few minutes here before I have to hit the rest of my deliveries.”

“We should all do dinner later,” Suzanne said. “I’m craving a burger.”

“Yeah.” Hadley nodded. “I never say no to a BLT from Seven Stones.”

Wrinkling her forehead, Mickie sighed. “Sorry, I’m swamped tonight. Right after I finish my deliveries this afternoon, I’m off to start a cake for Hazel for her party tonight.”

Both Suzanne and Hadley frowned.

“Party?” Suze asked.

Mickie’s eyebrows rose. “Yeah, haven’t you heard Robert just got out of prison last week? Hazel’s throwing him a big welcome home party.”

Hadley’s stomach clenched tight. “Like he’s coming in tonight from Seattle?”

“No, he’s been staying here with Hazel since he got out. Apparently he sublet his place in Seattle while he served his time, and he has a few weeks before he can move back in. Hazel was only all too happy to put him up.”

Suze and Hadley glanced at each other and swallowed.

“I’m sure.” Hadley feigned a smile.

“See you two around,” Mickie said as she headed back down the staircase.

“Bye.” Suze waved, then immediately looked to Hadley, eyes wide with fear. “You don’t think …?”

“Well of course I do. He gets out of prison and the woman who was responsible for putting him there dies the same week? That’s no coincidence. Is it?”

Hadley chewed the last bit of her scone and took another sip of her coffee. They’d ended up getting some gossip from the rooftop after all.

9

After they finished up their coffees, Hadley and Suze went back to work. Hadley tried calling Paul multiple times to tell him what they'd learned, but he must've been busy because he didn't answer. He sent her a single text that afternoon.

Sorry, crazy day here. What's up?

Hadley typed back, **Just some info you might be interested in about Mrs. B.**

Can it wait until later? I could do dinner, was his response.

Weighing her answer, Hadley decided that it could. Edith Butler was already dead. A few hours weren't going to change much.

Even though Mickie said she couldn't do dinner, Suze and Hadley had decided the idea was too good to pass up. It was only natural for Paul to join them.

She texted back. **Sure. Seven Stones. Meet me and Suze there at six.**

K. I think I'll be hungry enough to eat two burgers. See you then.

Hadley put her phone away and then closed the kitchen up so she could drop a load of packages off at the post office. Then, after heading home to feed Ansel and let the cat roam in the sunny yard a bit, she found herself too antsy to sit and wait around.

So she threw a book in her basket and biked into town. After about ten minutes, the large, timber-frame building came into view. The contrast of the dark-stained wood with the huge, white-rimmed picture windows created a cozy, homey feel even though the place had to be close to four thousand square feet with the large deck, which was almost as big as the interior. Hadley didn't blame the owners, though. Even though the deck was out of commission for the snowy and rainy months, it was too lovely during the other times of year to pass up. Plus, with the deck lower than the main building, following the slope of the hill down toward the river, nobody's views were ever compromised.

"Hey, Hadley!" a high school girl greeted her as Hadley walked inside.

"Hi, Kelse." Hadley smiled. She had babysat Kelsey Morrow when

she was a little girl. “What are you, a sophomore this year?”

Kelsey shook her head. “Junior, actually.” The girl beamed, looking suddenly more mature than Hadley had realized.

Nothing better to make you feel old than seeing the kids you babysat become young adults, Hadley thought with a sigh as Kelsey led her out onto the deck and to a four-seater table.

The rough, hand-carved tables, created by Hadley’s father, sat in a geometric pattern to fill the space. She wanted to run her fingers across their lacquered surfaces as she walked through the dining room. The scent of grill-smoked and garlicky specialties snaked through the place, stealing her attention away from the tables. And then there was the steady sound of the rushing river as they walked out onto the deck. White noise for some, but akin to the sound of her own heartbeat for Hadley and most of the Stoneybrook residents.

Seeing she was settled, Kelsey left her with a few menus before going back to the hostess table. Hadley didn’t need to consult the menu, though, so she leaned back in her chair, opening her book until someone came to take her drink order.

When Paul arrived about fifteen minutes later, he found her smiling down at her book, sipping on pint of her favorite blonde ale—Seven Stones was a microbrewery along with a restaurant that served up the best food in town.

“Man, life’s rough, huh?” He chuckled as he settled into one of the empty seats across from his sister.

She stuck her bookmark into the page she was reading then closed it, focusing on her brother.

“Can’t complain.”

“Nor should I.” He rubbed his face. “Though on days like today, sometimes it’s tempting.”

“What happened?” Hadley asked, noting the bags under her brother’s tired eyes.

Paul was in the middle of describing how he’d been mostly thwarted from doing any real digging into Edith’s murder because it had been one thing after another at the station that day. First, a stolen bicycle which ended up just having been loaned out and forgotten: Second, Mr. Hite got himself stuck up on his roof and didn’t know who else to call: And third, the paperwork McKay had sent Paul’s way for a case they’d worked on last week—one he *could’ve sworn* he’d already finished all the paperwork for.

“It’s like the guy doesn’t even want me to look into Edith’s death,” Paul said the last part quieter. Hadley guessed the fact that the death had been ruled a murder wasn’t quite public knowledge yet.

“Maybe he doesn’t.” She shrugged. “You said it yourself. If he’s trying to find reasons to get rid of you so he can put his nephew in

your position, that's going to be a lot easier if you seem incompetent, not if you end up solving the biggest case Stoneybrook has seen in years."

Paul nodded, but Hadley's point didn't seem to alleviate his fatigue. In fact, it only seemed to intensify the slump to his shoulders. Feeling responsible, Hadley waved Derek, their waiter, over and ordered her brother a beer, plus one for Suzanne, who would be there soon.

Just as Derek returned with the two microbrews, Suze walked in, finding them on the deck and waving off Kelsey to tell her she'd found her party.

"Hey!" Suze shimmied down into the seat next to Hadley excitedly, taking a long sip of her beer before saying anything more. "Boy, that's good."

"Hard day for you too?" Hadley asked.

Suze's lip curled up, and she let out a short grunt. "Meh. Just not super creative today." She sighed. "Alas, my muse is a jealous one."

"Who's it jealous of?" Paul asked with a smirk.

"This case," Suze whispered, leaning forward. "I couldn't seem to think about anything else all day. And by the time I realized that and switched to my other design orders, I'd already wasted half of my work hours today."

"What happened to *don't get involved*?" Paul asked, focusing on Hadley.

"You might want to reconsider that order once you hear what we found out." Hadley motioned to Suzanne to fill him in.

Suze told Paul everything they'd learned about Robert Smith being let out of prison just last week and how he'd been staying with Hazel. She only paused to order some stuffed mushrooms and nachos for the table.

"So?" Hadley asked as Suze sat back. The women watched Paul take in the information.

"I hadn't heard he was out." He shook his head. "I mean, his sentence was for a year, but I should've figured they'd let him out for good behavior. Who'd you hear this from?"

"Mick came and talked to us during a coffee break. We invited her here tonight, but she said she couldn't, had to get a cake ready for Hazel's party tonight. A coming home celebration for Robert."

Paul took another sip of his beer. "Interesting. Okay, plus what we know already, that makes for three strong suspects."

"Isn't it four?" Suze asked. "Louise, Hazel, Robert, and Dirk?" She listed them out.

"Hazel's out," Paul said. "She has an alibi. Was at work and stayed there for lunch, so she had no opportunity. That's already been

corroborated by multiple employees at the pharmacy."

"Oh. Got it. Three." Suze refrained from saying any more names as their waiter dropped off their appetizers, but Hadley noticed the relief evident in her friend's posture. Suze loved Hazel like a mother and would be glad to have her off the suspect list.

After digging into the food for a silent couple of minutes, Hadley said, "So what should we do next?"

"We?" Paul leveled an incredulous stare at his twin.

"Yes, we can obviously help you ask questions around town. As we've shown today," Hadley said.

Suze nodded.

Paul sighed. "Okay, but only questions. I don't want you two putting yourselves in danger. Right now, no one except for you two, Kevin, McKay, and I know it was murder." He kept his voice down and his eyes on the neighboring tables. "But knowing Stoneybrook, that won't last long. The elements of surprise and ignorance are on our side in this case. If the person responsible for her death still thinks we're ruling it death from natural causes, they won't be as defensive, so we need to start asking questions before it gets out."

Hadley and Suze agreed.

"Divide and conquer, then?" Suze asked.

"Sounds like the best use of our time and resources, since we want to be quick about this," Paul said reluctantly.

"I call Rob." Suze touched her finger to the tip of her nose.

Having lived next to Hazel her whole life, Suze's relationship with the woman was the strongest. Robert had also had a giant crush on Suzanne during the entirety of middle school, so Hadley was sure if anyone could get information out of the man, it was her.

"Good. I'll take Dirk, for obvious reasons," Paul said.

Dirk Croft was an unapologetic misogynist and probably wouldn't give either Suze or Hadley the time of day, let alone answer any questions about where he had been on Friday.

"That leaves Louise," Hadley said with a sigh. "Well, I suppose she's better than Dirk, at least."

Louise, in addition to her crude comments after Edith's death, was also one of the more vocal dividers in Hadley and Tyler's divorce. She had even tried to organize a boycott of the jam shop before she realized the townspeople were not going to be denied their jam, no matter how mad they were about their favorite couple breaking up.

At Hadley's hesitation, Paul and Suzanne glanced at each other for a quick second. It was the same knowing look they'd shared thousands of times over the years, the one that said they were both slightly worried about Hadley. It was also the same look that had made Hadley wonder, hope, and wish the two of them would someday get

together. Her two best friends in love? What could be better?

It had taken her probably too many years to realize it was never going to happen. Suzanne and Paul were just great friends, and always would be. Sometimes you just had to accept that some relationships would never change.

Like Luke and me, Hadley thought.

As much as she wished they could get back to their easy friendship, it didn't seem in the cards for them.

"Speak of the devil," she muttered as Luke Fenton strutted out onto the patio. He stopped to chat at a few tables before glancing over in their direction.

"Who?" Suze asked.

Hadley gestured over to Luke with a quick jerk of her head. "Golden boy."

"We weren't speaking about him," Suze said, nose wrinkling in confusion.

"I was—in my head," Hadley said. "Complaining, mostly."

Paul chuckled, but then turned and held up a hand, waving Luke over to their table.

Suze and Hadley groaned in unison.

He turned back to them. "Come on. You wouldn't deny a guy a seat."

"He's Luke Fenton. The guy could sit at any table here." Suze gestured to the patio.

At that point in the evening, the tables had filled in and almost the whole of Stoneybrook was there. That had been the owners' dream when they built the expansive restaurant; they wanted the place to be the hub of the town, and they'd succeeded. Principal Murray was at a table with his wife and three young kids, the Cascade High softball team was celebrating their third win in a row, and the local fire station was having a retirement party inside for Bob Shut.

"Yeah, it's packed tonight," Hadley said, blinking at her brother. "So why impose Luke on us?"

Paul shrugged and winked at her. "He's been gone for a long time. Give him a chance."

Luke strutted over to the table, a wide smile on his smug face. "Hey, it's the James triplets."

Suze often got lumped in with the twins, even by Hadley and Paul's parents. Suze, who'd been raised by her grandmother, loved being included, however, so she'd never minded the nickname.

"Sorry, but we were just about to leave." Hadley feigned an apologetic expression then signaled their waiter, hoping for the quickest check in history.

Luke surveyed the table, his gaze lingering on the few mushrooms

left over and the completely empty plate of nachos. “Uh, looks like you’ve just gotten through appetizers. The Hadley James I know would never leave this place without either having a BLT or a burger.”

Hadley’s mouth parted in surprise. He was right, annoyingly. She rarely left without ordering at least one of those, but she didn’t want him to win.

“You’ve been gone for a long time, Luke. Things change.”

He winked at her. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

10

The rush of the river almost made it impossible to hear the waiter as he stopped next to the table to see why they had called him over. Before Hadley could even make a check gesture with her finger, Luke said, “We’ll take two burgers, a French dip, and …” He narrowed his eyes at Hadley for a second before finishing with, “a BLT. Let’s also do a pitcher of the blonde for the table.”

The fact that he’d correctly ordered for the entire table made Hadley want to scream.

“Look, Luke—”

“So what are we chatting about? You all seemed pretty serious when I walked in here,” he said, sitting next to Paul.

The three of them remained silent, except for Paul clearing his throat.

Luke clicked his tongue. “That’s okay. I may have been gone for a few years, but I bet I can still read you three like newspaper headlines.”

Hadley scowled, but pulled her light cardigan closer around her, feeling exposed. “Well, apparently we can’t read you, so tell us what you’ve been up to. Why are you back here?”

Just like his normal, way-too-laid-back self, Luke sat back and sighed. “What’s to tell? Went to school in Seattle, worked for a company I hated for four years and learned everything I wanted to do differently, and then started my own business.”

“And?” Suze finished off the last sip of her beer. “That doesn’t explain why you’re here.”

Suzanne, being the one who’d told Hadley, had obviously already heard why, but it was common practice in Stoneybrook to ask questions you already knew the answer to in order to maintain the pretenses that they didn’t operate almost solely on backyard gossip. A ruse, sure, but one that kept the balance between civilized people and *The Lord of the Flies* in many of their minds.

Luke rubbed at the dark-blond stubble on his chin. “Uh, well. I’ve been telling people it’s to help out my family farm, but to be honest, I just missed it here.”

“That sounds like code for: you got your heart broken.” Suze

cocked an eyebrow at Luke.

Obviously caught off guard, Luke took a moment to school his features from surprise back to aloof. “I guess the Stoneybrook gossip mill is working as well as ever.”

Suze smiled. “Aww. You and Hadley are still two peas in a pod, broken hearts and all. See, Had? You and Luke are alike even though you try to deny it.” Her eyes went wide, and she clamped a hand over her mouth as if that could take back the statement.

Hadley pulled in a quick breath at her friend’s blunder. Frustration fought for purchase in her mortified mind. The woman only had one pint of beer, and she’d already jumped to the sinking ships tier of loose lips.

Heat crept up Hadley’s neck and into her face as the embarrassment won out over her anger at Suze. It wasn’t every day that they had dinner with Luke Fenton. Suzanne must’ve forgotten not to mention anything about Tyler around his lifelong best friend, especially having to do with a divorce that was new enough to still need “wet paint” signs in the legal world.

Luke cleared his throat, studying his muddy work boots. The sight made Hadley relax somewhat. Even after all that time in the city, the man still wore flannel shirts cuffed three times and his signature farm shoes.

“What happened in the city?” Paul asked, steering the conversation back to safety.

“Oh, you know.” Luke looked up again. “Thought I knew her, but it turned out I definitely didn’t.”

The corner of his mouth quirked up into a sad smile. Suze’s comment seemed to have created an awkward air that just wouldn’t clear. The moment for sharing had obviously passed.

“So back to a place where everyone knows everyone else’s business, and there are no secrets.” Hadley laughed dryly.

Luke met her gaze and held it for a moment too long. “You know better than most that even the smallest towns still have secrets.”

Hadley had just been cooling off from her embarrassment when another wave of heat hit her, pulsing up her neck. *Wait. What was that supposed to mean? Was he talking about Edith’s death or Tyler?* Hadley’s attention skirted over to Suze who was watching her wide-eyed, obviously wondering the same thing.

“At least I’ve got the tenant house, though.” Luke continued. “Moving back into my parents’ place at thirty just seemed too sad, even for me.”

“How long are you planning on staying there?” Suze asked.

He shrugged. “The tenant place is great; it’s just small. I won’t need anything bigger for a while.”

“At the market, you mentioned Dirk was coming around Edith’s a lot,” Paul asked nonchalantly, changing the subject.

Luke nodded.

“Did you see him there on Friday?” Paul asked.

“I think so.”

Suze, who had been taking a sip of her water, stopped. She noticed Luke look at her and put her glass down slowly.

Luke’s forehead creased together. “It was weird, though.”

“How so?” Hadley asked.

“Well, he normally parks that stupid BMW in the middle of the easement so I just about have to drive in the field to get around him, but this time he’d pulled off into Edith’s driveway enough that I didn’t have to do that.” Luke blinked.

The waiter came by with the pitcher of beer for the table, and Luke refilled Suze’s before he poured himself a glass.

Paul nodded. Suze took a drink. Hadley picked the last bits of nail polish off her left hand.

“Wait …” Luke put down his pint glass and turned his attention toward Paul. “You don’t think …?” He looked to Suze and Hadley. “Edith didn’t die of natural causes, did she?”

Hadley coughed and focused on her chipped fingernail polish.

“Wha— how’d you …?” Suze drifted off, her cheeks turning a bright shade of pink.

Hadley felt awful for Paul. From the way she and Suze had reacted, it was clear Luke had called the situation correctly. Paul, however, seemed nonplussed.

“Why do you think that?” He focused on Luke, who was smiling as Hadley and Suzanne squirmed on the other side of the table.

He chuckled. “Sorry. I ran into Mickie, and she asked if I knew what was up with these two musketeers.” Luke gestured to Suze and Hadley. “Said she just mentioned making a cake for Robert because he was back in town, and you two clammed up faster than an East Coast cookout. I put the rest together.”

Paul sighed. “Do you know if Mick said anything to anyone else?”

“She didn’t even know that she’d given me a clue. When she left, she was still lost as to why these two were acting funny, thought maybe Suze had finally developed feelings for Robert now that he was a bad boy, out of prison and all.” Luke put his hands up.

“Ugh. Yeah, right.” Suze shook her head.

“And you didn’t tell anyone your theory?” Paul asked, his deep voice lowering into that serious, *you’d better tell me the truth*, cop register.

“No. I swear.” Luke’s blue eyes were starting to tighten with worry. “Sorry, I didn’t realize it was such a secret.”

“It’s not, really,” Paul said. “We just want to get a jump on the questioning before people are cagey and have time to lie.”

“Makes sense,” Luke said.

Hadley wondered for a fraction of a second if Paul was smart to trust Luke. In fact, was it possible that the reason the man knew about Edith’s death being a murder was because he was the killer? No. She shook the thought right out of her head.

She and Luke may have had a mostly combative relationship since high school, and she may despise his best friend, but Luke Fenton was not a murderer. Plus, he had absolutely no reason to want Edith dead.

Settling her shoulders a few inches, Hadley focused on getting as much information as they could out of Luke while they had him here.

“What time did you drive by and see Dirk’s car—or whomever it was—parked there?” Hadley asked him.

He blinked. “Around ten. Right after I’d finished my morning chores with the livestock.”

“And you didn’t see anyone else around anytime before or after that?” Suze asked, obviously not dropping the fact that Robert’s motive and opportunity seemed much more realistic than Dirk’s.

“But the tenant house is behind trees,” Luke added, “so once I drive down the driveway, I can only hear, not see them.”

“Did you hear anything that morning?” Paul asked.

Luke shook his head. “So you think it’s either Robert or Dirk, then?”

Paul wasn’t going to give away everything it seemed, because he didn’t mention Louise.

“If you do, you’d be wrong,” Luke said.

Hadley coughed again, almost choking, having been taking a sip at the same time.

Luke scanned the table. “If you think someone killed Edith Butler, it has to be Louise.”

Everyone at the table but Luke said, “Why?” simultaneously.

“I thought you just said Dirk was there that morning,” Hadley added.

“I said I saw a silver car. It could’ve been Dirk’s, but it was also parked differently than normal. Plus,” Luke said and jabbed a thumb over his shoulder, “when I was talking with Mickie in town, she said they had the reading of the will today. Edith left her house and land to her sister, but she left the business to Louise. I think that’s a way better motive for murder than a golf course. Plus, if Dirk killed Edith to get her land, he couldn’t have known if her sister would sell or not. That’s a big gamble to murder someone over.”

Hadley let her eyebrows rise with interest. *Huh, the man had a point*, she thought, tapping her fingers on the tabletop.

“And everyone knew Louise had been trying to buy that place from Edith for years. Maybe she figured this was the only way she was going to get it.” Suze tilted her head as she seemed to ponder the idea.

Paul snapped his fingers, causing everyone to jump in their seats a few inches. “Louise also drives a silver sedan. Her car looks a lot like Dirk’s, just not quite as fancy.”

Sucking in a breath, Hadley said, “Maybe it was Louise and not Dirk, after all.” The realization, along with the knowledge of Edith’s last will and testament, made this information all the more suspect.

“Could’ve been, now that I think about it.” Luke nodded.

“Maybe I should be the one to go talk with Louise, tomorrow then, Hadley.” Paul crossed his arms over his chest and frowned at his sister.

She waved a dismissive hand at him just as their food showed up. “I’m fine. What’s she going to do? Stab me with knitting needles?”

Hadley and Suzanne laughed as they all tucked into their dinners, but Hadley didn’t miss the worried glance that passed between Luke and Paul.

11

The next day during her lunch break, Hadley grabbed a granola bar then headed to Main Street Skeins to talk with Louise. As if she needed confirmation about what they'd discussed yesterday in regards to what kind of car Louise drove, her silver Infinity sat parked in the spot just in front of the shop.

Hadley took a deep breath, stepping under the red-and-white striped awning and then pushed open the door. A few people milled around—two locals and a couple she didn't recognize. But the people inside were quickly forgotten as she took in the shelves upon shelves of woolen rainbows. Scents of washed and dyed wool, fibrous dust, and floral perfume hung in the air. The faint clicking of needles threaded itself through the whispered conversation of the customers—or maybe they weren't whispered, but the wool just seemed to deaden the noise.

Hadley reached fingers down to the basket nearest the door as if by instinct, and sank them through the strands of a downy, soft wool of the most vibrant color blue she could imagine.

"Hadley, honey. What can I do for you?" Louise asked from behind the wooden desk that served as the register.

Paul and Hadley's father had made that desk for Edith. It had been years before Hadley and Paul were born, of course, but they'd heard the story many times. The rich mahogany had been a stubborn wood, very difficult to work with, but by the time it was stained, the desk was an absolute masterpiece.

Extracting her fingers from the blue yarn, Hadley walked forward. "I wanted to pick up a skein or two of that pretty variegated wool my mom's always making socks out of. I think it's about time I tried my hand at knitting in the round." Hadley shot a smile at Louise who cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Hmm … you knitting in the round?" Louise set the project she'd been working on down on the desk in front of her. "From what I remember, dear, you could barely knit in the straight. Have you been practicing?"

Clearing her throat, Hadley ignored the heat racing up her neck and into her cheeks. "Uh, yeah. Mom's been working with me a little."

Louise's face stayed tight and untrusting for a moment before relaxing into a smile. "Okay, it's your funeral, though. Socks are a difficult project to start with."

Talking about funerals, when Edith's would be set soon, made Hadley's knees feel a little wobbly, but she followed Louise all the same as she walked over to one of the colorful walls of yarn.

"So what's going to happen to the place now that Edith's passed?" Hadley asked, keeping her voice low as to not disturb the other customers. Even though she already knew Louise had gotten the place in the will, she was testing her to see if she would hide the fact.

"Well, she's actually left it to me." Louise beamed, stopping to look back at Hadley who blinked in surprise.

"Oh? Wow, that's great." Hadley internally sighed, not sure if she'd been hoping for the woman to outright lie to her, but it sure would've made things a little clearer.

Louise nodded. "It really is …" Her gaze flitted across Hadley's concerned features, and she schooled hers into a scowl. "I mean, it's a silver lining in an otherwise terrible situation. For Edith, though, I'll keep it going. I'll even take over as the head of the knitting club. It'll be just like she never left us." Louise giggled. "I might even have to leave some of her infamous notes around town to keep everyone on their toes."

Hadley cleared her throat. There Louise went again, saying callous things about Edith. Her mention of notes brought to mind the one Hadley had encountered in Edith's kitchen the morning she discovered the woman dead in her home. Had Edith been in more than just a tiff with someone? Was there a suspect they hadn't thought of last night? She made a mental note to investigate that further. At the moment, she needed to focus on this suspect.

Louise selected a beautiful purple, pink, and orange mixture that reminded Hadley of a mountain sunset.

"Oh," she said, the word almost a gasp as she took in the variegated strands of wool.

"You'll be best off using one skein per sock since this is a worsted weight, which means it's a little thicker than sport weight, dear."

Hadley felt like she was making her first batch of jam all over again, green and unsure.

"And you'll need a good, small pair of circular needles." Louise shoved the two skeins of yarn at Hadley before walking toward a wall full of different needle packs. She picked two off their racks and held them forward. "A lot of people love bamboo because it's so light, but I prefer the metal because it makes for smoother transitions with your stitches."

She showed Hadley packets of the thinnest needles she'd ever seen.

Attached to the end of each needle was a plastic chord, just a touch smaller in diameter than the needles themselves. It was so long it coiled in length a few times before meeting up with the other needle. Hadley read the package: Size 0, 26 inches.

"Oh. I'm just making feet socks, not Christmas stockings or anything. I don't need anything that long."

Louise chuckled and shook her head. “If you want to knit in the round, Magic Loop is the best way. You want a long loop so it's easier to deal with and you don't feel confined. With this technique, you won’t be using the whole length all at once."

Hadley felt her forehead scrunch together in question. Her brain officially hurt. Why hadn't she said she wanted to make a scarf for her mother?

Seeing her confusion, Louise placed a hand on Hadley's. "Why don't you come to our knitting group tomorrow? We meet here. There will be enough of us to teach you."

Gulping, Hadley said, "Uh, sure. Okay. That would be great."

“I’ll write up a nice easy pattern for you too, and bring it Thursday. It’s the one I started with and still use when I make socks to this day. Toe up is the way to go.”

Hadley wasn’t quite sure what that meant. Louise bundled up a few more things she deemed *essentials* and then rang Hadley’s items up.

Finally regaining her mental balance after the whirlwind of yarn buying, Hadley remembered why she'd come in here in the first place.

"Sure is weird with Edith gone." Hadley shook her head and looked at Louise.

The woman sucked in a slow breath. "That it is."

"I wish I had gotten to see her one last time." Hadley handed over her card as Louise totaled up her order. "I suppose everyone who loses someone feels the same, though. When did you last see her?"

Focused on Louise's face, how it seemed to immediately lose all color, Hadley almost missed when Louise handed her card back to her. Once the card was free from her grip, Louise wrung her hands together, looking down at them like a nervous little girl.

“That’s the worst part,” Louise said, finally looking up from her hands. “The last time I saw her, we had a fight.”

“And when was that?” Hadley resisted leaning closer.

Louise’s face pinched. “I know it seems like I hated the woman. She was tough—yes. Nit-picky as all get out—absolutely. But she also cared more than she let on. I’ve been working here for ten years and we’d developed a sort of comfortable routine together.”

Hadley wanted to snort at the fake sentiment. She’d seen Edith yelling at Louise about how she was unpacking yarn just last week.

Nothing about that situation seemed at all comfortable. She did have to admit that Louise seemed emotional about the woman now. Was it possible it was out of regret?

The act happening in front of her distracted Hadley enough that she almost didn't catch the fact that Louise had completely avoided her question. Knowing a pointed, "Where were you on the morning of …" question would sound too accusatory, Hadley tried to gently lead the conversation back toward the fight.

"What was your fight about?"

Louise grimaced. "I'm so embarrassed now. It's …" She pulled out a tissue and blew her nose. "It was about Ansel, actually."

Hadley put a hand on the table for balance, her bewilderment rocking her back a bit. "What?" The cat?

"I know." Louise dabbed the tissue under her nose. "I wanted her to let me watch him. I didn't understand why she would only let you be the one to house-sit for her."

Hadley couldn't speak. She opened her mouth a few times in failed attempts, but it just clamped shut all over again once she realized she didn't know what to say.

Finally, after a deep breath, Hadley asked, "You got in a fight about a cat?"

"I love that cat, way more than she ever did." At that moment, Louise's fingers curled into a fist around Hadley's receipt. "I hear you've been keeping him. He wasn't mentioned in the will, so she mustn't have updated the thing since she got him. But if you don't want him, I'd love to take him for you."

Grabbing her receipt and her bag in one quick swoop, Hadley sputtered, "Uh, no thanks, I've got him. He's with me." And then she all but ran out of the knitting shop.

It wasn't until she was a block down Main Street that she realized she was squeezing the paper bag with her purchases way too tight and might be damaging the knitting accouterments she just dropped a good sixty dollars on.

Loosening her grip, she continued on toward the jam kitchen, replaying everything that had just happened, in her mind. If Louise had been the one to kill Edith and had wanted Ansel so badly, why wouldn't she have just taken him that morning?

Being in possession of the dead woman's cat would certainly be a damning piece of evidence against her, I guess, Hadley mused as she approached her building. Louise would've had to leave Ansel there and hope she could gain ownership after the fact.

Hadley shook the thought out of her mind as her hand closed around the jam kitchen's door handle. That wasn't going to happen. She had Ansel, and she was going to keep taking care of him until the

police told her differently.

Thinking of the police made her thoughts shift to Paul, and with that, frustration overtook her again. Ugh. She hadn't gotten Louise's alibi for that morning. Paul had sent her for one thing, and Hadley had managed to leave without it.

As she booted up her computer and began pulling up orders to fill, Hadley had to wonder if Louise had just forgotten to answer her question about when she'd last seen Edith, or if she'd brought Ansel up on purpose because she knew it would fluster and distract Hadley.

At least she already had an excuse to go back the next day for the knitting club. She could ask the question again then. Hadley eyed her bag of knitting supplies sitting on her desk. In the meantime, she was going to have to practice her knit stitch. Right now, that sounded like a fate worse than death.

12

Paul stopped by for lunch the following day, bringing sandwiches for them to eat while they chatted about the case. Though, *eat* seemed like a tame word to describe how he inhaled his sandwich.

Hadley wrinkled her nose, flicking a finger near his face. “You eat like a wild animal. What, were you raised in the woods?”

He smiled and nodded, then wiped a napkin over his beard to get rid of the mess. “I was, actually. You were there.” He patted his stomach. “That was good. I was starting to see double.”

To be fair, if her brother didn’t eat every hour, he turned hangry.

Hadley took a sensibly sized bite of her own sandwich and leaned back in her desk chair. “How’d it go talking to Dirk yesterday?” she asked.

Paul eyed her for a second. “How’d it go talking to Louise?”

“I asked first.” Hadley avoided his gaze as she crossed one leg over the other.

“Yeah, but you also have the Hadley’s-hiding-something lip pinch going on.” He pointed to the corners of her mouth.

“Nothing bad; I promise.” She put down her remaining sandwich half and held up three fingers.

“Scouts honor?” he asked.

Hadley shook her head. “Hunger Games. May the odds be ever in your favor because I’m not telling.”

Paul chuckled and then sighed. “Come on, we’re twins. You can’t keep things from me. Spill.”

Crossing her arms, Hadley said, “Okay. It’s just embarrassing for me because I’m such a bad interrogator. I got flustered, and she managed to slip out of answering the one question we needed her to answer about where she was that morning.”

Narrowing his eyes, Paul asked, “How’d she do that?”

“Mentioned taking Ansel away from me,” Hadley mumbled, looking down.

“You’re getting attached to that little cat, aren’t you?”

Hadley’s mouth tugged up into a reluctant smile. Just that morning he’d jumped right onto her shoulders while she’d been applying her makeup and had settled there like a purring scarf while she finished

getting ready.

Paul shrugged. “Don’t worry about her. I won’t let her take him from you.”

“Well, you shouldn’t worry either. I’m going to knitting club tonight, so I’ll get her alibi then for sure.” Hadley squared her shoulders, determined not to let the older woman avoid her questions next time.

At that moment, the back door swung open and Suzanne entered. Her gaze traveled immediately to the extra sandwich sitting on the table. Her fingers wrapped around it, and she had it open and in her mouth within thirty seconds.

Paul’s eyebrows rose. “How do you know that wasn’t *my* sandwich?” He crossed his arms over his chest and sat back.

Suze froze in the middle of a large bite. A piece of lettuce hung out from the corner of her mouth. Her wide eyes narrowed as they moved across Paul’s face. After a second, she chewed the bite and swallowed.

“You ate yours already. Wanna know how I *detected* that information?” she asked, holding up her pointer finger and continuing before Paul even had a chance to answer. “You’ve been here for at least fifteen minutes longer than I have. I know this because I am at least that late everywhere I go. Not to mention, there’s no way a sandwich would’ve lasted even two minutes in front of you uneaten. Which means that this sandwich was for me.”

Paul smirked.

“And secondly.” Suze held up a second finger. “You have crumbs in your beard.” She flicked her two extended fingers at his facial hair and then went back to devouring her own meal.

Paul’s cheeks turned red. He swiped self-consciously at his facial hair before Suze winked at him and added, “Just kidding with you. But I made you look, right?”

Hadley chuckled. “He also knows better than to get me food without getting something for Suzanne.”

“True. Last time I tried that, I ended up with a Suze on the other end of my sandwich.” Paul shook his head then turned to her. “Hopefully those detective skills are proof that you got more information from your suspect than Had did from hers.”

Mouth full, Suze’s brown eyes focused on Hadley’s in question.

Hadley’s shoulders slumped forward as she relayed the little information she’d learned from her visit with Louise. “I left with sixty dollars’ worth of knitting paraphernalia and zero answers.” She sighed.

Suze mumbled, “Mummer, orree ad” through a mouthful of bread.

“You learned some good information, though,” Paul commented. “We know she wanted the cat but didn’t get him, and that she didn’t

know Edith was leaving her the knitting shop."

Hadley dipped her head in concession. "Yeah. She seemed genuinely surprised about that, and she went all sappy on me about Edith, though she still managed to work in a dig about her late boss. I don't know. I guess Louise might not be the sure-thing suspect I thought she was."

Swallowing a rather large bite, Suze smiled. "Which only makes my suspect pull ahead in the race."

"Race?" Paul asked, incredulous.

"Yeah, like a race to jail." Suze shrugged. "Anyway, I may or may not have crashed Hazel's party the other night after I got back from our dinner at Seven Stones."

"No way." Hadley gasped.

"Uh huh. Just let myself in like I used to when I was little."

Suzanne lived in her late grandma's house, right next door to Hazel Smith. When Suze's grandma had passed away a few years ago, she'd left the small house to Suze, who'd lived there since.

"So? What happened? What'd you find out?" Paul asked.

Lowering the sandwich away from her mouth, Suze leaned forward. "I'd bet all my money that Robert is our killer. Our good ol' buddy, Roberto has sure changed during his time in the icebox."

"Is that what they call prison these days?" Hadley asked Paul, who shook his head.

"I'm serious, though," Suze continued. "Robert—skinny, number-crunching, accounting-club-president Robert must've spent his whole six months doing push-ups or pull-ups … while doing *all* the crunches. He is ripped and has a definite chip on those sculpted shoulders of his."

Paul cleared his throat, and Hadley noticed he was clenching his jaw a little.

"Sorry, but the guy looked hot." Suze waved a hand to fan her face.

During high school, Hadley and Tyler had been together, so she'd been off-limits for other guys. Suze, however, had been the object of many boys' affections—with her bouncy brown curls and her large doe eyes—including Robert Smith. And even though he was two years older than they were, the guy had been too quiet and awkward to even spit out a full sentence whenever he tried to talk with Suzanne, let alone ask her on a date.

"Prison was good to him." Suze finished with a wink.

"You cannot be serious." Paul stood, causing his stool to scrape loudly against the tile floor of Hadley's jam kitchen. "You just told us you think he could've murdered Edith."

Suze shrugged. "I didn't say I was going to *date* him."

“So the only reason you think he might be the murderer is because he’s strong and angry?” Hadley asked as Paul seemed to calm down, returning to his seat.

Suze’s eyes lit up. “Oh, and he also showed me the *silver BMW* his buddy’s loaning him since his old car was repossessed to pay for his fines.”

“I don’t know.” Paul’s forehead creased. “Big strong guys, if that’s what we’re calling Robert now, don’t usually overmedicate people as a means of murder. If it was an emotional crime, revenge, and he’s so strong now—which, by the way, I still don’t know if I believe—it would make much more sense for the guy to strangle Edith or stab her.”

Paul’s words hung heavy in the air of the kitchen, uncomfortable in their intensity.

Suze blinked, recovering quickly. “Because he needed to make it appear that she died naturally.”

“But he had to know the autopsy would show foul play, right?” Hadley asked. “Robert is too smart to overlook that.”

“The guy was stealing from old people and went to prison. Smart isn’t exactly how I’d describe him,” Paul added.

“And did he have an alibi?” Hadley set down the last quarter of her sandwich. All of this talk of killing and prison was making her lose her appetite.

The same was not true for Suze, who took another big bite, chewed, and then swallowed it before answering. “He was at home, he says, and Hazel was at work, so she couldn’t confirm or deny the fact.”

“So he could’ve easily been anywhere.” Paul leaned forward.

Suze touched her pointer finger to her nose.

Hadley pulled in a deep breath. “It sounds like your horse is pulling into the lead.”

“What about yours?” Suze turned to Paul.

He shook his head. “Threw a shoe on the back nine.”

Suze snorted. “Back nine? Well of course he lost the race if he was playing golf. You’re terrible at track talk.”

“And you’re suddenly an expert?” Paul asked.

“I’ve bet on the ponies once or twice.”

Hadley pursed her lips together to hide a smile as Paul scoffed.

“Dirk said he took a long lunch break and went home. I haven’t talked with Cathy yet, but his secretary says he goes home for lunch a lot, so …” Paul shrugged.

“Oh, that’s not a thrown shoe. That’s just a tight muscle. Cathy might very well be in on this whole affair,” Suze said.

The James twins glanced at her skeptically. Cathy had been the PTA president for a good five years during her sons’ time at the local

elementary school. She was the kind of mom who had freshly baked cookies waiting for her kids when they got off the bus and made the best pie—aside from Mickie's—when it came to the harvest pie walk.

Paul stared out the large front windows of the jam kitchen. Hadley followed his gaze and watched the people passing by. This whole situation was new to them. Having to suss out a killer in their small town was not something any of them had ever thought would be within their duties, even Paul. He'd gone into law enforcement to help, of course, but he'd expected to assist people with quarrels, help solve petty crimes, and rescue the odd cat out of a tree.

It simply felt wrong to think of their fellow townspeople like this. But ever since they'd found out Edith hadn't died naturally, it had to be their reality.

Paul sighed. "I'd say stick with your horses. We're not at the finish line yet. I think we need way more information on each of our marks. We don't have enough to know who to put our money on."

"Inspiring as it was, so much of what you just said was wrong," Suze said with a groan.

"Ponies can be unpredictable," Paul said. "I'd say any of them could pull ahead at this point."

13

That evening found Hadley clutching a Pretty Jam Good tote bag full of yarn, confusing needles, and a load of apprehension.

And that was just surrounding her *I'm gonna knit socks* idea, not even the fact that she was going in to Main Street Skeins to find out whether or not Louise could've killed her boss.

Hadley swallowed the worst of her reservations as the building came into view to her right. Even though the closed sign hung in the front window, Hadley pulled open the front door and walked inside. She followed the sound of voices to the back room.

The knitting room was open to customers all throughout the week. Many of Edith's regulars would come sit back there during the day to chat and work on their latest project. But on Thursday nights, the local knitting group commandeered the space.

As Hadley entered, she scanned the people gathered around the large oak table in the middle of the room, her gaze falling on a host of familiar faces.

"Oh good," Louise said as she stood. "I was hoping you wouldn't chicken out on us." She hustled over to Hadley's side as if she was afraid the young woman would bolt at any moment.

If she is, she's more right than she knows, Hadley thought, pulling in a deep breath as Louise led her over to an open chair around the table. Perching on the edge of the seat, Hadley glanced up, pasting a smile on her nervous face.

"Hadley is working on her first pair of socks," Louise explained as she returned to her seat and picked up her project once more.

Positive, encouraging murmurs swept around the table like the wave in a sports stadium. Hadley felt her shoulders settle a bit.

"They're going to be for my mom." She pulled out the variegated yarn, showing off the bright colors.

Nadine, a quiet, forty-something mother of four said, "What a lovely present. Your mother will love them." She smiled warmly at Hadley.

"A very ambitious project." Gretta, the sole elementary school bus driver in town, was known for being blunt and a little brusque, so Hadley wasn't surprised by her statement.

Jennifer, a primary school teacher close to Hadley's age and obviously used to keeping order and peace, jumped in. "Nothing you can't handle, though, especially with Louise's help."

The group agreed. Seeing that they had all started on their projects, Hadley dug out the needles and set them on the table next to her first ball of yarn.

"Oh good, she's got you using circulars." Gretta raised her eyebrows, impressed. "Changed my knitting life." She held up her own pair, the beginnings of something pink and lacy hanging from them. "I use them for everything now, not just when I'm knitting in the round."

Nadine nodded. "Me too. They're much more kid-proof too."

"Well, I can use all the help I can get." Hadley picked up her pair. "How do they work, exactly?"

The group laughed, and Louise came over to help her cast on.

Fifteen minutes—and three restarts—later, Hadley was finally getting the hang of the Magic Loop technique. She glanced up as Halverson Walters, the owner of Hal's Food N Stuff walked into the room.

He set down a bag and settled into one of the remaining empty seats. "Sorry I'm late tonight, ladies." His deep voice was leathery and dry, matching his weathered face. When he caught sight of Hadley, the wrinkles around his eyes deepened. "Why, I didn't know you'd be joining us, missy."

She grinned. Hadley loved Hal. Besides the fact that she'd been seeing him almost every day since her divorce for food and supplies, the man had been a fixture of her childhood as he lived next door to her parents. She and Paul had grown up hearing his booming voice in the mornings as he greeted his chickens and whistled to his many dogs as they galloped around his property. Hal's wife had passed away when Hadley was ten, so the James family always made sure to invite the man to holiday celebrations and meals.

"Just getting some lessons," Hadley said, in response to Hal.

He pulled out his own project, a gray, wool hat with a brown mountain pattern zigzagging around the circumference.

Cheesy as it sounded, Hal's Food N Stuff was actually quite the eclectic store. One might even call it a boutique. Not only did he carry local meat, produce, and dairy, but he also had a huge assortment of gourmet and organic bulk items. He also sold some clothing and handmade items like his own knitted hats, scarves, and gloves. And while his small store was a few miles outside of town, it was still a popular tourist destination for that reason. His stock was always changing, but it was bound to be interesting and delightful.

Despite being as tall and craggy-looking as the mountains surrounding Stoneybrook, Hal was one of the better knitters in town,

having mastered the Fair Isle technique of intermixing colors and patterns. His wife had taught him before she died; they'd had long periods of time waiting together during her chemotherapy treatments, and she'd used the time to teach him everything she knew.

Hal still donated most of what he earned from his knitting sales to a cancer research fund in Julie's name.

Now that Hadley didn't need Louise hanging over her shoulder helping her with every stitch, the group fell into a relaxing rhythm. The sound of needles clicking away punctuated the scattered conversations about what was happening in each person's life. Sometimes no one spoke for long minutes. The silence wasn't awkward, however. Instead it flowed around the room like slow curling steam from a mug of tea until another conversation began.

At one point, when Hadley was beginning to feel like she was getting the hang of the concept of knitting in the round, she glanced down and realized she'd dropped a stitch a few rows back. Louise was busy answering a question Jennifer had asked and Hadley hated to interrupt. She bit back her initial reaction of mild panic, remembering that her mother had taught her how to pick up a dropped stitch. At least she could try to fix it on her own before asking for Louise's help.

The task consumed all of Hadley's focus, but she succeeded in remedying the problem and was back to knitting normally minutes later. Ready to celebrate with the others, Hadley turned her attention back to the knitters.

"I heard they got a hold of her only sister, but she couldn't come out until the Friday after next, so they'll wait to do the funeral that Saturday," Gretta was saying.

Hadley held her breath, hoping she hadn't missed anything too important. She needed to pay more attention to what they were saying and less attention to her knitting.

"Did you have any idea she would leave the place to you?" Jennifer asked Louise.

The older woman shook her head. "Not even an inkling. You all knew Edith; she was controlling, harsh, and pessimistic in the best of times."

Hadley froze, swallowing back her celebration about her retrieved stitch. She'd been so focused on it that she'd missed the conversation switching to Edith. Remembering that this was in fact what she'd come here for, that the knitting was actually a ruse, she listened in.

"You wanted to buy it from her, right?" Jennifer asked.

"Yes, I'd asked her many times what she planned on doing with the shop when she was ready to retire or even if I could partner with her now. But each time I mentioned anything of the sort, she snapped at me and told me she wasn't going anywhere for a long time." Louise's

needles clicked away at what appeared to be a fluffy, periwinkle shawl.

The others commented that they'd heard Edith make similar claims. And while Hadley had to take a break from her project while she listened, everyone around the table just kept knitting while they talked, sometimes not even looking down at their needles at all. It might've boggled her mind if she'd let herself think about it, but Hadley had a job to do. She'd let Louise get away without getting an alibi from her once already, and wasn't about to let it happen again.

Though, as Hadley waited for an opportunity to jump into the conversation, she realized she was feeling less and less convinced that Louise had anything to do with Edith's death. She said herself that she hadn't known Edith planned to leave the business to her. Without that, Louise's motive was decidedly diluted.

Or was it just that Hadley was happy and comfortable around the group of knitters? Did Louise being so kind and helpful have something to do with the reason Hadley was feeling like she couldn't have been involved?

Hadley checked her project, which was starting to resemble the toe of a sock. Maybe the fact that her opinion of Louise was changing was even more reason to figure out once and for all if she had an alibi, to prove she couldn't have done this.

Sensing a lull in the conversation, Hadley said, "I just keep thinking about if I had been there for Edith, maybe she wouldn't have passed away." Hadley shook her head.

The others nodded then focused on their knitting.

"I mean, I was probably in town having lunch after making jam all morning. What if I had gone home to eat and stopped by to make sure she didn't need anything? Do you guys ever think like that?" She glanced up at the group.

Jennifer smiled. "There wasn't much I could've done. I had twenty kids hanging on me all morning and I had to make copies during my lunch, so I barely even had a chance to eat, let alone leave."

"Yeah, I was taking the third graders up to Cascade Ridge for a field trip to the museum." Gretta sighed.

"To be honest," Hal said, "I liked Edith all right, but the woman didn't have many friends, and she lived so far out of the way. She's lucky you found her, Had, or I'm not sure anyone would've for a while."

While the man had a point, it still made Hadley's stomach churn with discomfort. She noticed Nadine and Louise still hadn't said anything. And while Hadley was sure Nadine would've been taking care of her toddler and baby, it could've been Louise's silver car parked out front of Edith's place that day.

“What about you, Louise?” Hadley asked, hoping she wasn’t being too transparent with her question. “I know you and Edith had a difficult relationship, but …”

Louise’s gaze flicked down to her knitting and there was a slight break in the rhythmic cadence of her needles clicking against each other. “She was difficult.” Louise nodded. “But yes, I have wondered if I hadn’t been so busy here at the shop, if I would’ve gone by to check on her; would that have made any difference?”

Hadley concentrated on not letting her relief whoosh out of her in a big exhale. Louise had been here, working. She couldn’t have been parked at Edith’s place.

After getting Louise’s alibi, Hadley relaxed, focusing on her knitting and the people around her. By the time everyone began packing up a few hours later, the setting sun was painting the mountainous skyline with oranges and pinks in a way that felt, to Hadley, like a celebration.

The knitters waved goodbye, calling out “see you later” and “until next week!” Hadley wasn’t sure if she would come back for another meeting since she seemed to be getting the hang of the sock pattern, but she thanked everyone and told them she’d see them around. As she turned to walk back to the kitchen down the street where her bike was parked, Hadley sighed, pulling in a deep breath of the cool spring evening air.

Hadley yelped as she was suddenly yanked into the alley between the knitting shop and the town attorney’s office. Her heart raced until her wild gaze settled on Nadine’s face. She put a hand over her heart.

“Nadine! Oh my gosh, you almost gave me a heart atta—”

Nadine’s hand clamped over her mouth, cutting off her statement. “Shh,” the woman whispered, looking in every direction before backing them farther down the alley.

Hadley’s heart rate spiked again, worried at the quiet mother’s odd behavior. “What’s going on?” she asked when Nadine finally stopped and took her hand away from Hadley’s mouth.

Nadine’s blue eyes were wide as she stopped looking around and focused on Hadley. Her voice shook as she said, “Louise lied in there. I came into town to take the kids on a walk along the river, and I saw her leave in her car that day, right around lunchtime. She was driving toward Edith’s house.”

14

Hadley's breath felt ragged as it left her. Nadine's hands still gripped her arms and they tightened as she saw her words register.

"What? I—how do you know?" Hadley couldn't create a coherent sentence, but Nadine seemed to understand what she was asking.

"It's all over town that Edith didn't die of natural causes. I figured that was what you were getting at by asking us all what we were doing." Nadine glanced over her shoulder at a scraping sound but then turned back to face Hadley when it turned out to be nothing.

So much for Paul's plan to ask as many questions as they could before word got out about Edith's cause of death. Hadley suppressed a disappointed head shake.

"Which means Louise knows too." Hadley slumped back, letting her body rest on the building behind her.

"And her lie proves you can't believe anything she just told you."

"Great." Hadley let out a disappointed scoff and then added Louise's name back to the suspect list in her mind.

"Sorry to spill all my secrets and run," Nadine said with a furrow of her forehead. "But Nick's got all the kiddos, and I want to get home for bedtime. If either of us tries to go it alone, we end up falling asleep in one of the kids' bedrooms from the fatigue of four bath times, four pajama wrestling matches, and four stories."

Hadley waved a hand to show Nadine she understood. Still too shocked to speak, she watched as Nadine retreated to her minivan. Hadley didn't feel like she even blinked until she could no longer see the taillights of the van in the distance. Then she exited the alley, back to Main Street, and the safety of her kitchen.

While she walked, she pulled out her phone and texted Paul and Suze in a group message.

And with a sudden turn of events, Hadley's horse pulls way ahead.

Mere seconds after she sent the message, Suze texted back.

Aww. Is it weird that I feel disappointed my horse/suspect might not win?

Yes, Hadley wrote back, but at the same time as she hit send, a text from Paul came through.

Don't count your chickens till they hatch, Had. My horse just made a pitstop and is raring to go.

Suze texted back, **Dude, come on … now you're mixing metaphors on purpose!**

"You know, in Seattle, you'd be a prime target walking like that, Babe."

Hadley jumped at the voice, looking to her right and left even though she knew who it belonged to all too well. Her gaze settled on Luke Fenton, standing in the middle of the sidewalk, arms crossed over his chest. Glancing back in front of her, Hadley realized she was just three or four steps away from running straight into a lamppost.

Unhappy that she had reason to thank him, Hadley said, "But we're not in Seattle." Cocking an eyebrow, she slipped her phone back into her purse.

"No, no we're not." Luke sighed.

Hadley scoffed. "If you miss it so much, why don't you go back?"

His head jutted back slightly. "Ouch." He blinked. "And I don't miss it *so* much. I mean, it's a great city and there are things that I miss, but I moved back for a reason."

"To annoy me?"

He laughed. "*That*, and I missed home." He watched her for a long moment. Just when she was beginning to get uncomfortable, he said, "I missed all of you naïve, small-towners who can walk down the street without looking, money literally about to fall out of your pocket, and your biggest fear is running into a lamppost."

"Wha—I don't have …" Hadley patted her pockets. Her cheeks heated up as she felt a wad of a few twenties hanging about halfway out of her back pocket. She'd put them there so she would remember to pay Hal since the man only took cash, and she'd been out last time she'd gone into Food N Stuff. Obviously, the reminder hadn't worked.

"Touché, sir." She tucked the money back into her pocket.

Then it was her turn to appraise him. His jeans were worn, yet they appeared clean. He wore a white-and-blue gingham button up, the sleeves rolled up to show his tanned forearms. His dirty-blond hair was swept to the side. Definitely not in a way that was practiced or gelled, but in that working in a sunny field all day way. Seattle hadn't changed him. Not one bit, it seemed. A smile fought with her lips, tried to tug up on the corner of her mouth, but she pressed her lips together to hide it.

Luke chuckled. "See? Even that." He pointed at her lips. "City girls are flashy and made up, and you *never* know what they're thinking. But you, Had, I can always tell what you're thinking."

Hadley felt a happy flush at the fact that Luke called her Had instead of Babe. He hadn't called her Had since high school, at least

not that she could remember.

"I've been gone for a decade, and I can still read you like a book, just like when we were kids." He shook his head.

At this, Hadley's heart clenched tight, grew suddenly defensive. "Not just like when we were kids, Luke."

He dipped his chin. "And … now I'm remembering the hard part about knowing what you're thinking."

Hadley suppressed a sigh. How did Luke get off playing the victim here? She couldn't deal with this right now. She had enough on her plate.

"Well, I'd better …" She pointed down the street, but instead of an exit, Hadley spotted an opening.

Robert Smith was walking out of the bakery, a muffin clutched in his hand. This was her chance to ask him some more questions, maybe make him slip up about his alibi.

Hadley started walking forward, following Robert as he jogged across the street toward Fenton Park, named after Luke's family. "See you around."

A hand wrapped around her arm, gentle but insistent, causing her to stop short. She looked back at Luke. His normally relaxed—if you asked Hadley, too relaxed—expression was tight and his blue eyes suddenly dark as if they'd been clouded over.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked, leaning to the side, so he could keep an eye on Robert.

"Uh …" Hadley tried to think of an excuse. "I was just going to …" *Not congratulate him for getting out of prison, that's weird*, Hadley mused. *And I have no reason to talk with the guy other than to interrogate him* … "I need some financial help." She shrugged, because that was easier than rolling her eyes at herself. *Really, Hadley? Financial advice from a guy who just got out of prison for fraud?*

Luke's dark expression broke and lit up as if his stormy emotions had created a crack of lighting. He boomed out a loud laugh.

"I forgot how bad of a liar you are, Hads." He shook his head, wiping fake tears from his eyes. Each time she thought he was getting himself under control, he would look past her at Robert and then start laughing all over again.

Birds chirped happily in the trees surrounding the town and lining the river. For the first time in a while, Hadley wanted them to shut up. Or maybe that was just Luke she wanted to quiet.

Yanking her arm from his grasp, she placed a hand on each hip and leveled a glare at him that Paul always said could melt the paint right off a building. *Since you can read me so well*, she thought. *Read what I'm thinking now.* Hadley tapped her foot while she waited for him to stop.

“Had,” he said finally, clearing his throat. “I’m not about to let you run after a man who just got out of prison so you can interrogate him about a murder you think he could’ve committed.”

Hadley sighed. She wanted to slump onto the nearest bench in defeat. Instead, she pushed back her shoulders, cocked an eyebrow, pivoted on her heel, and walked across the carless street.

“Leave me alone. I can handle myself.”

Luke was at her side within a few steps. “Seriously, this is a bad idea. Robert could be dangerous.”

She stopped on the other sidewalk, just before Fenton Park. “The man is carrying a muffin into the park to eat while he watches the sun set.” She pointed to where Robert had stopped down by the river, sitting on a bench as he peeled the wrapper off the outside of his muffin. “I think I can handle myself around a muffin-eating man. I’m not twelve anymore. I’m a grown woman.”

She began walking again.

“It’s not about the fact that you’re a woman. I would be a bad friend if I let Ty—” Luke cut his sentence short.

Tyler.

Hadley wished she could curl up into a ball and Luke would be gone, back in Seattle. They kept walking, shoes falling in a silent pathway over the cooling grass.

The rushing river came into view over the bank. They were about two hundred feet from Robert now. Sounds of water rushing over the smooth stones soothed Hadley out of the slight tizzy she’d gotten herself into between fighting with Luke and being reminded of her ex-husband and everything that had happened between the two of them.

After a few seconds, Luke cleared his throat. “Look, Had …”

She stopped, faced him, and turned her features cold, hoping to be like those unreadable city girls. “Fenton, I can’t stop you from living here. I can’t even blame you. But you seem to have forgotten what things are like between us.” She took a deep breath as he leveled those blue eyes at hers. “We are not friends anymore, you made that *abundantly* clear. Your loyalties are with Tyler; I get it. But you can’t have it both ways. You can’t pretend anything is like it used to be. You made your choice very clear.”

Luke’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed, listening, taking in Hadley’s words. He ran his palm across his light brown stubble. His face registered the seriousness of her speech and, after a second, he nodded. “Right.” The word cracked as if he were a teenager all over again, his voice in the middle of changing three octaves lower. “You’re right. I’m sorry.” He glanced up from the grass, then behind her. “I’ll —uh—I’ll see you around.”

At that, Luke turned and walked away.

Hadley sighed, closing her eyes and listening to the rushing consistency of the river as if it were the very breath in her lungs. When she opened her eyes a few quiet moments later, she felt ready to talk to Robert.

Turning toward the bench, Hadley's body was simultaneously let down and spun up with anger. She shook her head. Robert was gone. She'd missed her chance.

"Darn you, Luke Fenton," she said aloud and then walked back to the jam kitchen.

15

Aside from a few cryptic texts here and there on Friday, Hadley didn't hear from Paul until she spotted him walking up to her booth at the farmers market that Saturday. Suze was out shopping, so Hadley was watching over both tables. There was a considerable lull in the crowd, however, which Hadley appreciated because she had some things to say to her brother.

"You know," she said, placing a hand on one hip. "I know I claim to do so a lot, but I can't *actually* read your mind. You have to tell me things. I've been worried."

Paul sighed. "Sorry, it was a delicate situation for a bit there."

Hadley glanced around, making sure no one was within earshot. "What happened?"

"Yesterday, Kevin and I found out that someone had applied for eminent domain of Edith's house and property a few weeks ago."

Hadley blinked. "Uh … sure. Wow. Big news. And that means what, exactly?"

Chuckling, Paul said, "It means that someone petitioned the town to take control of Edith's land, stating that it would be in the best interest of Stoneybrook if they could develop it in another way."

Understanding dawned over Hadley. "Oh, like in a manicured lawn with holes and flags kinda way?"

Paul touched the tip of his nose.

Hadley frowned. "But if Dirk was already on the path to getting her house sold off, why would he kill her? That wouldn't be in his best interest."

"Except that the application was denied."

"Ah … Which would leave someone feeling discouraged and might lead them to take matters into their own hands."

"That's what we thought, but it wasn't Dirk who applied."

"Or his company?"

Paul shook his head. "It was some property developer up in Cascade Ridge."

"Cascade Ridge? How's that supposed to help our town? Most of Cascade Ridge wishes we didn't exist, let alone wanting to help us grow. No wonder it was denied." Hadley exhaled. "Was that why you

had to go there yesterday?" She looked up at him. "So … you find anything out?"

Paul's face darkened. "Unfortunately, the guy who runs the company is a good friend of Sheriff McKay's and seemed to know his rights a little too well. He told us that he wouldn't answer any questions without his lawyer, and we couldn't have access to any of his business contacts without a warrant."

"So your horse hit a dead end," Hadley said just as Suze came back, standing next to the twins.

She groaned. "I'm never using metaphors around you two again! You're driving me insane."

"You haven't always been insane, then?" Paul asked, winking at her.

"Just for that, I don't want to hear your news." She turned back toward her table.

"Wow." Paul lifted his eyebrows. "That's too bad. It's pretty juicy stuff."

Suze glanced over her shoulder, narrowing her eyes at Paul. "How juicy?"

Paul walked over to tell Suzanne his news, but Hadley stayed put in her booth as a customer approached. After helping the woman—and selling her three jars of jam—Hadley scanned the market. Just like last week, Luke stood behind the table at the Fenton Farms booth.

He smiled at her, tipping his chin up in a silent hello.

Her lips instinctively began to curl into a smile in return, but she pressed them into a tight line when she caught herself. There was too much broken between Luke and her … too much that he'd broken and never repaired. Not to mention how seeing him still reminded her of Tyler every time. She just couldn't handle that right now.

Hadley turned away, watching Paul and Suzanne as he finished telling her about the newest clue in Edith's case. That was when she remembered that she had news for them too.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you what I learned on Thursday night." Hadley stepped over to where they were chatting between the two booths.

Wide-eyed, Suze and Paul listened to Hadley explain about how Louise had lied about her alibi and who knows what else. Hadley left out the part of the night where Luke had saved her from running into that lamppost or how she'd missed out on her chance to talk with Robert. They didn't need to know all of that.

"So here we are … all of our horses neck and neck." Suze narrowed her eyes at them as if it were a real competition. "What are we going to do about that?"

Hadley glanced at the people milling around the market. In front of her, about ten feet away, two locals named Judy and Mindy had

just stopped to chat.

"Judy, I heard about John's truck getting stuck in that ditch yesterday. Were you able to get it out?"

"Yes, Steve came with his winch and towed us out." Judy rolled her eyes. "That should teach John to try driving like he's sixteen. Though, at least he isn't blowing all of our money on poker like Casey Graham. I don't know how Sarah puts up with him."

"From what I hear, she doesn't anymore. They're separating."

"Oh good. I knew that, but I didn't want to spread gossip if you didn't."

Hadley suppressed a laugh. Then she got an idea. Turning to Paul and Suzanne, she said, "We're going to use our greatest resource."

"Which is?" Suze asked.

"This nosy little town. Everyone knows everyone else's business." A fact that had been the bane of Hadley's existence lately, but one she was willing to exploit if it helped them catch Edith's killer.

Paul furrowed his eyebrows. He didn't like the idea.

"Paul, think about it. Who did you tell about Edith's death being a murder?"

"The sheriff, you two, and Kevin. That's it."

"Yet everyone found out somehow. There's a reason small towns are usually so low on crime, and it's not because there are fewer people. You would have to be a fool to commit a crime when everyone knows everything about everybody else."

Paul dipped his head to one side. "Everyone really knows Edith was murdered?

Suze scoffed. "Oh yeah. Adele Stevens came up to me yesterday morning to ask if I'd heard the news. That woman's as deaf as a post, so if she knows …"

"So we ask the town about our suspects?" Paul ran the back of his hand along his beard-covered jawline.

Hadley glanced back at the knitting table where Louise and Gretta sat chatting and knitting away. "Just be extra careful if your suspect happens to be here."

Suze nodded solemnly.

Paul pulled up a chair. "Well, the two of you are much more likely to elicit information than me—people are too wary of the law 'round these parts. I'll sit here and watch over the booths."

Hadley grinned as Suze linked an arm with her. "Wish us luck."

Paul shook his head. "No can do. It's bad luck to do that in horse racing." He tried to keep a straight face, but a smirk took over all the same.

Suze let out defeated sigh. "I can't bring you two anywhere fun, can I?"

“Probably best not to.” Hadley laughed as they walked into the market.

Having already completed any shopping she needed to do before the market opened for the day, Hadley was able to peruse the booths differently than when she was on a mission to gather the things on her list. Now she could saunter, observe, take her time. And most of all, listen.

At Leo’s fresh flowers booth, she and Suze overheard Trina and Laura discussing a delay in the construction on the new high school. Interesting, sure, but unhelpful in the case. While they browsed Mickie’s bakery booth, drooling over her scones, cinnamon rolls, and doughnuts, they learned that there’d been a big fight between the two Tippery sisters over their father’s old truck. But it was when they were sauntering past the espresso cart that they heard Lydia McMeans say Robert’s name while talking with James, the local butcher.

Hadley stopped, pulling Suze with her.

“Hey, Lydia. Hi, James.” She smiled a big, toothy smile at them. “Isn’t it crazy that it’s already been six months since Robert was incarcerated?”

No attempt was made to cover up the fact that she’d been listening in to their conversation. People in Stoneybrook knew everyone listened to everything. It wasn’t a surprise.

Lydia and James nodded.

“It’s just flown by,” Lydia said.

James snorted. “I’m guessing Robert doesn’t feel the same way.”

The four of them turned solemn at the reminder that this was no laughing matter.

“Having both Robert and Luke in town again makes me feel like I’m back in high school,” Suze said.

“Well, get used to it, girl.” Lydia cocked an eyebrow. “I don’t know how long this idea Luke’s got about moving home will last, but I know for a fact Robert isn’t going anywhere anytime soon.”

“I thought he was only staying with Hazel until his apartment was ready for him to move back into.” Hadley leaned in close.

Lydia shook her head. “From what I hear, he just said that to save face. He can’t afford that place anymore now that he’s out of a job. Nope, he’s in Stoneybrook for the foreseeable future. Saw him picking up applications around town yesterday, in fact.”

Hadley exhaled, surprised by the information. Not that it was too much of a revelation, but it certainly did add to the motive Robert would have for getting rid of Edith. If he blamed Edith Butler for his troubles like his mother did, the inability to move back to the city would be yet another line on the list of ways she’d ruined his life.

Reminding herself not to feel sorry for the guy—he was the one

who'd broken the law and stolen from unsuspecting clients, after all—she waved bye to Lydia and James, pulling Suze along with her.

They needed to get moving if they wanted to learn as much as they could.

As they continued walking around, Suze and Hadley learned that Alfred was getting a new dog, Jenny's dog had bitten Karl's sheep on the leg, and Richard had won a thousand dollars yesterday on a scratch-off ticket.

Hadley avoided the quilting and knitting booths, knowing they wouldn't be able to ask candid questions in those places. However, as she and Suze walked back toward Paul, she noticed Hazel was gone from the quilter's booth.

Curious, Hadley motioned to Suze, who followed her idea.

"Hey, Ida Mae, June, and Frannie," Suze said sweetly as she brushed her fingers across a particularly soft and cozy flannel children's quilt.

"Why, hello girls," June glanced up from the steamy-looking romance novel she was reading and smiled. "Hadley, dear, we don't have any scraps today. It was my week and I forgot them in my sewing room."

Hadley smiled back. "Don't worry about it, June. You already told me earlier, remember?"

She squinted one eye, then her face lit up with recognition. "Oh, right. Goodness me, I must've forgotten that too."

"We don't need anything. Just came to chat." Suze shrugged and nonchalantly looked at a set of quilted oven mitts.

June, Ida Mae, and Frannie all perked up at Suze's statement. That was town code for either *I've got information I want to share* or *Do you have any information you want to share?*

"We've just been thinking a lot about Edith," Hadley said, "and how terrible it was that she was alone when she went."

Playing along, Suze let out a low "mmm hmm."

Ida Mae's eyes lit up. "Oh, dear. Unfortunately, I don't think she was alone. Did you girls not hear the news yet?" Her voice held a tone of sadness that just didn't match her giddy expression.

When they shook their heads, Ida Mae continued.

"Edith was murdered," the woman whispered, but in such a forceful way that she may as well have spoken at full volume.

Suze and Hadley gasped.

"You don't know that for sure, now," Frannie said, her tone censuring. "She could've committed suicide, of course."

Ida Mae and June bobbed their heads in concession.

"Well, sure. She could've, but everyone knows she didn't." Ida Mae huffed.

“Everyone does?” Suze asked.

“They do. Edith Butler was entirely too stubborn to take her own life. Would’ve been like giving in, giving up for her. No, Edith was killed.” Ida Mae dipped her chin. “Though who killed her certainly seems up for debate.”

The way Ida Mae drew out the word “seems” made it clear she didn’t agree.

“You think you know who it is?” Hadley leaned forward.

She crossed her arms. “I don’t think. I know.”

“Go on,” Suze said.

“Dirk Croft was here not two weeks before Edith passed.” Ida Mae delivered the information as if it explained everything.

Suze and Hadley traded a quick glance at the mention of one of their current suspects.

“Here? At the market? But he never comes here, other than last week.” Suze narrowed her eyes, skeptically.

Ida Mae nodded. “I know he’s never here, but twice in the month Edith was killed? That’s enough evidence right there to put him away.”

That’s nowhere near true. Hadley resisted the urge to raise a skeptical brow, and let the woman talk.

“Two weeks ago he came sniffing around, wanting to talk to Hazel. That man always looks red-faced and bothered, but he was even more so that day. And he hung around, pretending he might buy one of my hot pads, until he got up the courage to ask Hazel how much blood pressure medication was too much to take in one sitting.”

“What?” Suze stiffened, giving the woman her full attention.

“Uh, why is that important?” Hadley asked, feigning ignorance.

“That’s how she died. An overdose of blood pressure meds.” June spoke up.

Suze shook her head. After chatting for a couple minutes, the girls made their excuses and headed back toward their booths.

Once they were out of earshot of the local gossip circle, Suze huffed and said, “And Paul’s horse takes the lead.”

16

Suze picked up Hadley Monday morning with sunglasses and a smile on her face. After learning about Dirk's knowledge of Edith's blood pressure medicine at the market, they'd decided to investigate the eminent-domain situation a little deeper, since Dirk seemed the only one of the three suspects who would benefit from the application.

"Road trip!" Suze called as Hadley climbed into her friend's powder-blue Mini Cooper. They could've technically taken the Jam Van, but it was high on gas consumption and low on stealth. If the women hoped to infiltrate Cascade Ridge for an information-collecting mission, it would be best to attract as little attention as possible.

Paul had assured Hadley that Mr. Kulp of Cascade Ridge Property Management wouldn't recognize her.

"Not only do we not look like twins, we don't look anything alike. He won't know you're my sister. Plus, you and Suze did so well getting information at the market. I want to see if you can learn anything I couldn't up in Cascade Ridge."

Because she couldn't say no to her brother—and because an adventure up north sounded fun—she'd agreed. They had both worked most of Sunday to make up for the day off. The only thing Hadley hadn't been able to do was mail her packages, which she had stacked by the back door to be delivered to the post office. She'd have to do it as soon as they got back to town later that afternoon.

Buckling herself in, she gave Suze a thumbs-up, and they set off. At twenty minutes north, Cascade Ridge wasn't far enough away to justify calling it a road trip, but they were small-town girls who grew up encompassed by their tiny community. The few times they'd driven up with their families—or in high school when they would drive themselves—it had felt like entering a different universe.

Suze blasted her favorite road trip mix, and they sang along as she drove. After about fifteen minutes, she took the left-hand turn up the foothills. They left the mighty Cascade River in their rearview mirror and snaked along a densely wooded road that climbed up higher on the ridge.

Even though Hadley hadn't been to Cascade Ridge for a couple of years, not much of note had changed. Sure, a storefront here had

become something else, and a building there had been built, but all in all, it still held the same stuffy, soulless, and stale feeling as it always had.

The city had the same, *every shade of gray* color palette, causing one building to fade into the next. Rolling down her window, Hadley let the mountain air wash past her. Crisp as it was, it lacked anything of character. You couldn't smell Mr. Jenkins grilling up some of his famous steaks two doors down or the fresh bundles of lavender Mrs. Holloway tied up with ribbon and placed on everyone's doorstep every summer. Nor could you hear that lovely, constant rushing of the river, the sound left behind that far up the ridge.

Suze pulled into a strip mall in front of a storefront that had the CRPM logo of a house and a tree painted on the window. They took a collective breath, glanced at each other, and nodded. Hadley was the first out of the car. She repeated their story in her head and adjusted her springy, floral blouse.

I just got divorced. I'm so mad at my husband for cheating on me that I want to level our house. I'm here to look at my options.

She pursed her lips together as she grabbed the handle of the glass door and pulled. Suze followed her inside, probably repeating her *I'm the supportive best friend* lines she'd prepared for their act.

The nicest thing was how much of it wasn't an act. Paul had instructed them to make as little of their story as possible a lie. It would make it much easier to stick to the ruse under the pressure.

"Good morning," the chipper receptionist said, giving them a thousand-watt smile. "Welcome to Cascade Ridge Property Management. How can I help you?" He was young, thin, and appeared to be about twenty times more awake than Hadley felt even on her best day.

This young man most likely didn't know of her propensity to chip away the paint on her nails when she was nervous, but she didn't want to attract any more attention than she needed to. She clasped her hands behind her to keep them steady.

"Good morning," she replied, adopting a businesslike tone. "I'd like to talk with the owner. I have some property I need to list, and I would like to look at my options."

The receptionist blinked then glanced down at his computer. "Let's see. Mr. Kulp has an appointment in about twenty minutes, but I could see if he could fit you in right now. Would that work for you?"

Suze nodded.

"Yes, that would be lovely," Hadley said with a smile.

Brad, as they learned his name was, called his boss. After getting the okay, he led them down the hallway to an office with a frosted glass door and the name Ryan Kulp printed at eye level. Brad knocked

at the same time that he opened the door. Suze and Hadley followed him.

The first thing that struck Hadley was the impersonal nature of the office. It smelled like fresh paint, held all of two pictures on the wall—pictures from some tropical island that seemed as if they'd come with the frame—and a suspiciously plastic-looking plant set in one corner next to Mr. Kulp's large desk. The desk must've come straight out of a home-design catalog, Hadley decided; it was impersonal and probably made out of mostly pressboard. She knew she was biased, her father being a master woodworker and all, but always felt that a person's desk choice said a lot about their character. If that was true of Mr. Kulp, she could expect him to be unoriginal and mostly fake.

"Hello," the lanky man behind the desk said as he reached a long arm out to shake Hadley's hand. "Ryan Kulp.

He was tanned and wore a crisp-collared lavender shirt under his light-gray suit. His blond hair—obviously dyed because his roots were as dark as Hadley's almost-black locks—swooshed across his forehead in a style that screamed *used car salesman*.

Hadley introduced herself and Suzanne. They sat in the two seats across from his desk as he settled back into his.

"So what can I do for you?" he asked, flashing them teeth that had to be bleached—they were so bright.

Taking a deep breath, Hadley explained to him her very real situation. "Well, I have a house on about an acre down in Stoneybrook, and I'm wondering if it would be better to list it as-is or subdivide the property and sell it off. I've heard it can be expensive to run power and water to the other parts of the property, but that it could greatly increase our chances of selling. I'm newly divorced, and my ex-husband and I are both starting new jobs, so I don't know how much we'd be able to invest up front."

The only lies in her whole statement were that she would never divide up their beautiful piece of property and, if she did decide to sell, she would never give the business to Cascade Ridge. She swallowed the truth, however, and watched Mr. Kulp as he took in what she'd shared with him.

"Got it." He nodded. "Well, I'm happy to help, especially because of who you are."

Hadley stiffened at the phrase, unsure what was going to come next. Did he know she was Paul's sister?

Kulp smiled. "A woman who isn't out to get her ex-husband and who hasn't turned completely bitter and irrational, is a rarity in my experience."

She should have been relieved that he didn't recognize her, but his assumptive and misogynistic statement sent a hot streak of anger

through her.

Suze cleared her throat in the seat next to her, no doubt also fuming about his remark.

Hadley took a moment to breathe deep and get her anger in check. First of all, she absolutely hated it when men insinuated that women were irrational just because they felt emotions. Also, this man had no idea what her divorce had been like or what had caused it. She had every right to be *out to get* Tyler after what he'd put her through. Regardless, she wasn't here to give him business anyway—just to gather information, and to do that, she needed to play the part.

Because she didn't trust herself to speak anything other than a stern admonishment of his narrow view of the opposite gender, Hadley simply smiled and nodded.

"So, Stoneybrook?" Mr. Kulp dipped his head. "I have to be honest; we don't get many people from Stoneybrook in our offices."

Hadley said, "Yes, well, my ex-husband's family is a significant part of the community, and there are a few who are still having a hard time with our split."

"You said *many* people?" Suze asked, still focused on what Kulp had said. "But you do get some?"

"You aren't the only ones who feel like the small-town locals are holding you back."

She hadn't said that at all, but Hadley kept her corrections to herself. She didn't know how, but she could also tell that was all the detail they would get out of the man about the subject. He seemed like he was particularly good at keeping secrets.

Disappointed, she sat back and listened as Kulp went through her options, focusing on money and profit. He finished by saying, "It's just about time for my next appointment, so that'll have to be all today." He slid a card across the table with his information on it. "I'd be happy to help you if you want to come back another day, though. I'd love to help develop Stoneybrook and bring it into this century, if you know what I mean."

He winked at both women, making Hadley shudder. From the way Suze shifted in her seat, she could tell her friend felt the same. Her feelings were confirmed when they stood and Suze shoved her hands in her pockets instead of shaking the man's hand after Hadley.

"Looks like we're not any better than Paul at getting this guy to talk." Suze sighed as they pushed their way through the front doors and back out into the parking lot.

Hadley pressed her lips together into a tight line. "Between the defeat and the fact that I'm starving, I feel like I'm spiraling into a bad mood."

"Omigosh, tell me about it." Suze shook her head as she unlocked

her car, and they both climbed in.

"I don't think I can make it the drive back home." Hadley cringed as she gauged their food options.

"Ditto," Suze said. She frowned. "Uh, I see a questionable pizza place, two Mexican restaurants, and a grill in our direct vicinity."

Hadley followed her gaze to the different buildings. The pizza place was the only one of the choices that wasn't part of chain. She and Suze looked at each other.

"Pizza place," they said at the same time.

"Questionable pizza from a small business has to be better than supporting these giant companies," Suze muttered, turning on the car.

Half an hour later, they could say for sure that it wasn't. Stumbling from the pizza place, Hadley glanced down at her hands, which still felt greasy. "Since when does pizza need eight pounds of cheese on it?"

Suze said, "When your dough is so terrible you have to soften it with grease?"

Neither had been able to finish more than half a slice and while the rumble was gone from Hadley's stomach, she couldn't wait to get back to Stoneybrook and real food.

"That was a waste of money." Suze sighed.

"I think we're just spoiled. I say we drive like the wind, and make it back to town for a late lunch of actual food."

Suze seemed to agree because she got into the car and just about peeled out of the parking lot once Hadley buckled up.

"Good riddance, Cascade Ridge," Hadley said, looking out her window as they passed by the strip mall where the Cascade Ridge Property Management office was located.

Her breath caught in her throat as she recognized someone walking up to the building and pulling open the door.

"What?" Suze asked, keeping her eyes on the road, but glancing once over her shoulder for whatever had surprised Hadley.

"I just found out who the other person from Stoneybrook is that Kulp has been doing business with," Hadley said.

"Yeah, it's gotta be Dirk, right?"

Hadley shook her head. "Louise."

17

Suze focused on the road as she drove her car down the long, winding hill out of Cascade Ridge. Hadley hung up the phone and sighed.

"Paul's going to look into it."

Suze nodded. They sat in silence for a minute. That was all they could do, anyway. It wouldn't do to go ask Louise what she'd been doing up north. She'd already lied to Hadley and the police once. What would stop her from lying about why she was at Cascade Ridge Property Management?

"And Louise pulls ahead?" Suze asked, confusion written in the wrinkles by her squinted eye.

Hadley huffed out a breath. "I don't know anymore. Robert has the best motive with Edith ruining his life and all. But Dirk reeks of premeditation with all of his blood pressure medication questions. And then there's Louise, lying about her alibi and now showing up here at a company that was actively trying to take Edith's land from her."

"Yeah. Maybe she had a deal with them, like *I want the business, but you can have the house.* I mean, I know she's your suspect and all, but if it ends up that Louise likes to golf, I'd say you win." Suze came to the stop sign at the bottom of the hill and turned right, back toward Stoneybrook.

"Every time I think it's gotta be one of them, someone else pulls ahead."

They discussed every possible scenario as they drove the rest of the way home. The brick buildings, accented by brightly striped awnings came into view as Suzanne pulled onto Main Street.

"Even though we were only gone for a few hours, it's good to be home." Suze waved at someone as she stopped to let them cross the street.

"Before we get a real lunch, do you mind stopping at the kitchen so I can pick up a few things to take to the post office?" Hadley asked.

The Stoneybrook post office closed each day at two twenty-two in the afternoon, making it the first thing Hadley had to do after lunch during her days at the kitchen. And even though she hadn't

technically worked, she still had orders to mail out to customers.

"Sure. Just don't get to chatting with Pete like you usually do." Suze shot a knowing look her way. "Those three bites of pizza are wearing off, and I'm officially hangry."

Suze pulled into the alley behind the jam kitchen and waited while Hadley ran inside to grab the few boxes she needed to ship. Minutes later, Hadley scooped up her packages and bustled inside the post office. She stepped into Penny's line, remembering Suze's condition that she not get stuck talking with Pete.

Penny was a pleasant woman about five years older than Hadley, and definitely the reason anything got done at the post office. Pete was the reason people *came* to the post office. Not only was the man a born entertainer, regaling customers with stories and smiles in the few minutes it would take him to process their packages and letters, but he sang just about anything he could.

"Good afternoon, Francine," he sang at that very moment, holding the last syllable of the woman's name as she beamed.

Hadley sighed, knowing she'd miss how he would say her name as if it were three separate words. Miss Had Ah Lee, he would call her—technically adding the "ah" in the middle, but she didn't care.

She stepped forward as Penny finished with her customer. Meeting Hadley's gaze, Penny's happy face morphed into an apology.

"Sorry, Had." She placed the closed sign in front of her. "I've got to run to the back for a few minutes to figure out a mix up with one of the deliveries. You'll have to go to Pete."

Hadley nodded, hiding her smile. If Pete was the *only one* there would be no way she could avoid his line. *Oh well*, she thought as she got behind another local who stepped up to the counter to a song.

She finally let the smile consume her face as the customer in front of her finished and walked away. Glancing behind her, she saw there weren't any other people needing assistance. Hadley loved it when she didn't have to rush her interactions with Pete, but then she remembered that she couldn't stay and chat today. A hungry Suze waited in the car.

"My oh me, it's Had-ah-lee!" Pete sang to no specific tune, using more pitch changes than Christina Aguilera.

Hadley grinned. "Hey, Pete." She slid her pile of packages onto the counter and let him take over scanning and entering them into the computer.

"What's new?" she asked, leaning on the counter.

"Everything and anything," he gave her his standard first response. "But did you hear …" He leaned closer, just like he always did, unable to keep out of the gossip. "Oh, of course you did. With that brother of yours." He swiped at the air with his hand, pulling back and giving

her a wink.

Pete had worked at the post office for as long as Hadley had been alive, so he knew exactly what he could and couldn't say while still staying in compliance with the United States Postal Service bylaws. Now in his fifties, the man was a veritable magician, able to tell you everything without actually telling you anything at all.

"We're looking into it, actually. Anything you've seen or heard?" Hadley cocked an eyebrow.

Glancing right, then left, then over his shoulder, Pete cleared his throat. "I don't know what it means exactly, but I do believe our sour friend was the object of someone's step nine of twelve." He made a circle in front of his chest with his right fist.

Hadley pulled in a deep breath as she deciphered his clues. She recognized his sign for sorry and then it clicked. Step nine of a twelve step program must be the resolution step, apologizing for hurting those around them. The sour friend had to be Edith, which meant …

"I wasn't aware they had a twelve-step program for embezzlement," Hadley said when it clicked, watching Pete closely to see if she'd figured it out correctly.

He shrugged. "But they do for what makes a man need that kind of money." He locked eyes with Hadley. When he seemed to see his information click in her brain, he added another of his signature phrases, "I don't know, and I'm not saying anything." He finished with her boxes, setting them on a cart behind him. "Shall I put this on your tab, little darling?" he asked.

Hadley nodded. She used the post office so much that she usually just came and paid up once a month. They knew where to find her, after all.

While he finished moving her packages, she pondered what Pete's information meant for her suspects. If Robert had been in a twelve-step program in prison, then maybe he didn't harbor as much hatred toward Edith as Hadley had first thought. Maybe he'd come to terms with his actions and was taking responsibility. This very well could topple him right off the suspect podium.

"The interesting thing," Pete said, leaning his elbows on the counter, "is that they could've just as easily been hand delivered."

Hadley pressed her lips together. If Robert could've hand delivered his apology letters, that meant he'd only started sending them once he was out of lock up.

"Prison funding cuts? His program didn't begin until he got out?" Hadley guessed.

To which Pete let out a hearty laugh. "Oh, doll. You kill me. Prisons are better funded than schools these days." He shook his head. "And that's a short time to get all the way from one to nine."

“Which means the letters might not have been apologies after all,” Hadley said, her revelation mixed up with a long exhale.

“You don’t say?” Pete smiled, giving the response he always did when Hadley had figured out what he was trying to say.

“Thanks, Pete.”

He winked at her. “Nice to see you,” he sang after her as she jogged back to Suze’s car.

She could feel her best friend’s cool stare from ten feet away. Inside the car was practically Alaska.

“What?” Hadley said, cringing. “It was busy.”

Suze scanned the empty parking lot and then cocked an eyebrow in a “oh, really?” kinda way.

“He was the only one. Penny had to go to the back.” Hadley held up her hand. “But I did learn something about your suspect, so you might want to drop the attitude and listen.”

“Okay spill, time-liar.”

“I think Robert was sending Edith threatening messages.”

Suze leaned in, intrigued.

“You know how Paul told us Edith’s sister had said the only unusual thing she said before dying was how she needed to get out of Stoneybrook because someone or something from her past was creating trouble?”

“Yeah, you think she meant Robert?”

Hadley nodded.

“Does a year count as the past?” Suze asked. Then she added, “Well, I know it *technically* does, but would you say that? Would you say, ‘It’s from my past’ if something was only a year old?”

“Not necessarily, but then there’s the note I found on Edith’s counter by her mail the day I found her. It was a note that said something about taking what wasn’t hers and how she’d done it for the last time.”

“Yeah, that could just as easily be from Louise, though.”

“Except it couldn’t. The handwriting was way too nice. I tried to read a sock pattern from Louise the other day, and it was just a notch above chicken scratch.”

Suze dipped her head to the side. “Robert *did* have very nice handwriting.”

Suzanne had received many a note from Robert in high school. They’d always marveled at his neat, practiced script.

“And I’ve seen Dirk’s writing on notes he would leave my dad about the building when he rented it and had to fix a door lock or unclog a drain. It’s barely better than Louise’s.”

“So the threatening note could be from Robert.” Suze sighed. “Got it. Now can we eat?”

Hadley nodded. “But we’re going to the taco truck so we can get something to go. We need to call Paul right away. He needs to get his hands on that letter from Edith’s, so he can compare it with Robert’s handwriting.”

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As intrigued as Paul was with the clue about Robert possibly sending Edith letters, he said McKay had banned them from going into Edith's house without him, so he would have to wait until he could convince the sheriff to make a trip down.

In the meantime, Suzanne promised to search for an old yearbook to see if she could find a sample of his writing. Hadley wasn't holding her breath, however, as her friend was one of the more disorganized people she knew, and it sometimes took the woman a week to locate her TV remote.

But, being that Robert had never signed any of Hadley's yearbooks, she was stuck waiting.

To take her mind off the case, Hadley decided to jump in the shower and wash off the greasy Cascade Ridge pizza experience from earlier that day. She emerged minutes later, wrapped in her robe and a towel twisted into her hair, with a much breezier outlook on life. Smoothing some moisturizer on those little lines appearing on her forehead and around her eyes, she sighed.

Ansel, who was perched on her bathroom counter, meowed as if to pull her attention away from her self-criticizing thoughts.

She smiled. "Thanks, buddy. I think you look great too."

Ansel tipped his head to the side, dipping it slightly as if in thanks. Then, without as much as a meow for warning, Ansel vaulted from where he was sitting and launched himself at her head. For a quick second, Hadley thought he was attacking her, but then he settled on her towel-wrapped hair. Her head wobbled with his weight, small and insignificant as it was. After getting his balance, Ansel blinked and plopped his bottom down, sitting on top of her head.

Glancing up at the mirror, Hadley realized her mouth was hanging open. She let out a chuckle, but then thought better of it when the motion caused him to tip to one side.

"You truly are a special cat, aren't you?"

It took her a little coaxing to get Ansel down, but after that, Hadley dressed and went downstairs. She still wasn't hungry after her late lunch, so dinner seemed unnecessary, but a hot drink sounded perfect.

Just as Hadley sat down with a tall mug of steaming tea, there was a knock on her door. She looked down at Ansel, lying in her lap.

"Sorry, buddy. You're going to have to move."

Ansel didn't need to be told twice. With the next round of knocking, he jumped off and slipped under the couch.

While she wasn't expecting anyone, it was possible Suze had located her yearbook 500 percent faster than Hadley had predicted. Or Paul could've found a different way to gather a handwriting sample from the man.

Hadley padded across the living room and into the entryway, opening the door without a second thought.

Her heart jumped into her throat as she saw who was standing on the other side.

"Uh, Louise … hi. What are you doing here?" she asked, hoping her voice wasn't wobbling as much as her courage was.

The older woman smiled, big. Big and fake. "Oh. Hadley, dear, I just—well, I know it's silly, but … could I come in?" She wasn't stammering nervously, but almost talking over herself as if there were two different people talking.

Hadley gulped. Did sweet Louise have dual personalities? Was one a knitter and the other a murderer?

She wished she'd grabbed her phone when she'd gotten up to answer the door. She needed to get Paul here, right now. She tried to send him panicked, twin vibes. Maybe he would feel her distress and come running.

"Sure, come on in." Hadley took a wary step back and let the woman into her house.

Louise slipped out of her clogs, revealing a pair of striped, hand-knitted socks. Hadley could tell from the ridge running right at the tip of the toes that it was the same toe-up pattern she'd taught Hadley the other day.

"Hey, cute socks." Hadley pointed at her feet.

Apparently fear made her extremely complimentary.

Louise scrunched up her toes and then released them. "Why, thank you." Even though she acknowledged Hadley's remark, the woman didn't seem interested in Hadley at all. She scanned the house, doing everything short of pulling up the couch cushions, as she searched for something.

"What can I do for you, Louise?" Hadley asked, walking around her and into the kitchen. "Would you like anything to drink? I just made myself some tea."

"Yes, yes. Tea would be lovely." Louise continued to search the room.

Is she looking for boogeymen? Murderers? Hadley half expected

Louise to drop to her hands and knees any moment to check under the couch.

Turning to make the tea, Hadley's throat went tight as she thought of another explanation for the strange behavior. Was Louise making sure no one else was in the house, so she could get rid of her just like she got rid of Edith?

People talked in Stoneybrook, so she would surely know that Hadley had been investigating Edith's murder. It was possible she was getting close, too close for the killer's comfort.

She poured hot water into a mug and pulled a teabag out of her basket of choices. Dipping the bag into the steaming water, Hadley glanced over at her phone on the kitchen counter. It was a good five feet away from her. Louise would most surely notice if she went for it. She increased the power behind her twin vibes and turned to face Louise.

"Here you go." She held out the mug. "It's just a chamomile blend. I don't like to drink anything caffeinated after four or else I'm up until the middle of the night."

"Thank you, and chamomile is just lovely."

Hadley looked at her own mug, sitting on the end table next to her couch. She remembered the cup of tea sitting next to Edith at her home. Hadley's cheeks heated up with worry as she realized she'd turned her back to Louise. She could've very well added anything she wanted to Hadley's tea. And while she didn't take any medications Louise could use to poison her with, she was sure the woman could figure something else if she wanted her gone badly enough.

"Oh, there you are!" Louise cooed as she sat in the chair across from Hadley's couch. "I was hoping I'd get to see you."

Hadley craned her neck to see Louise smiling down at Ansel from where he hid under the couch. Her fear of being poisoned calmed from code red to a warm orange. Louise had just wanted a chance to see Ansel. The thought made her soften as she walked into the room, settling on the couch.

"Ansel, buddy. Come here." Hadley fluttered her fingers toward the cat in hopes of luring him from his hiding spot. As he slowly slunk out into the open, Louise's face peeled into a joyful smile.

Hadley asked, "Louise, is this why you came over? To see Ansel?"

The woman studied her mug of tea for a moment before nodding. "I wanted to make sure he was happy here with you."

Louise's blue eyes settled on Hadley before they returned to Ansel, who was launching himself into Hadley's lap, purring up a storm.

"Which," Louise said, "it very much looks like he is."

Hadley narrowed one eye as she petted Ansel.

"But that's not quite it." That warm orange began to tick back up

into the red range as Hadley realized Louise had ulterior motives for coming over. Would she try to take Ansel away from her? Or just kill them both?

Louise sighed. “No. There is … something I need to get off my chest.”

Like admitting to murder? Hadley wondered, heart rate spiking back into a concerning range. Didn’t murderers in movies always like to tell people how they did it, how they got away, right before killing those new victims?

“You’re not like the others, Hadley,” Louise said. “I know there’s more to your divorce than you’re letting on. I have a feeling you could’ve dragged Tyler’s name through the mud and back if you wanted to, but you didn’t. You’re not a gossiper.”

“Thanks?” Hadley wasn’t sure what to say, but that sounded better than, *please don’t kill me*.

“It’s just killing me, and I have to tell someone, so someone knows.” Her blue eyes were becoming wild, moving around the room as if they didn’t feel safe settling in one spot.

Hadley didn’t appreciate her use of the word, “killing,” and she held onto Ansel, tight. Could they run for the front door? Make it outside? In her mind, she willed a knock to sound on the front door. Suzanne. Paul. She didn’t care. Someone needed to show up.

“I lied the other day when you came to the knitting club.” Louise’s eyes became glassy with tears.

Hadley gulped. Unsure if she should pretend she didn’t already know Louise had lied, Hadley decided to stay silent.

“I wasn’t at the shop all day. I went out to see Edith. That was when we had the fight I told you about, concerning Ansel.” She nodded to the cat.

Of course. She already told me this, but I’d run out of the shop at the mention of her wanting Ansel and hadn’t done any more digging. Hadley felt like rolling her eyes at herself, but kept them trained on Louise instead.

“I didn’t kill her, though. I know many people think I did. I thought I had at first, honestly, when they said it was natural causes. I spent those first few days feeling awful that our fight had caused her poor heart to give out. Then, when I learned that she’d most likely been killed and that she’d left the shop to me, I knew it would look even worse, so I started lying.”

Hadley wanted to relax, but she also wasn’t a fool and knew Louise could be putting on an act just as easily as she could cast on a hundred stitches or more.

“I swear she was still alive when I left her house that morning.” Louise shook her head, and a tear fell down her cheek.

Tears seemed to be the one thing Hadley couldn't quite handle. No one would ever cry alone around Hadley. The reaction was akin to watching someone yawn and finding herself yawning the next moment. She'd never been able to stop it.

In an attempt to steel her silly emotions, she said, "If that's the case, why were you in Cascade Ridge the other day, talking with the company who was trying to force her out of her house?"

Louise blinked, inhaling quickly. "You—how—I didn't—" she sputtered.

"Cut the act. Suze and I saw you." Hadley stared her down.

"That's not exactly my secret to share, you see." She tightened her hands around the mug in her lap.

Hadley sighed. "Look, Paul's pretty sure that whoever killed Edith had something to do with that company, so whomever you're protecting could be the killer, if you say you aren't."

Eyes wide, Louise nodded. "Okay, I—"

Her sentence was cut off by a loud banging on Hadley's front door. She couldn't help but feel a trace of frustration along with relief at hearing that sound. It must be Paul; he'd gotten her twin vibes. But darned if he wasn't interrupting the moment Louise was about to spill the one thing that might help them catch the real killer, if it wasn't her.

Why wasn't he just coming inside? Hadley wondered. Maybe she'd gone and locked the door on him.

The banging sounded again. "Hold on." Hadley placed Ansel on the couch and stood to go let Paul inside. Old, wooden farmhouse floors creaked under her feet as she made her way into the front room and pulled open the front door.

But instead of Paul or even Suzanne, like she'd hoped for, Luke Fenton stood on her porch, worry etched across his face.

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"You okay?" he whispered, stepping inside and scanning the front room. "I saw a silver car parked here. I couldn't tell whose it was, but I figured you might need some help." He patted Hadley's shoulders, arms, grabbing her hands as he reached them.

Pulling her hands away from the intense closeness of having Luke standing in front of her, holding on to her, Hadley shook her head.

"Luke, I'm fine." Frustration rose inside her, but she tamped it down because just a few minutes ago, she'd been scared for her life too. He was only trying to help. "Thank you for coming to check on me, but I am okay."

He sighed, large shoulders relaxing, then nodded. "Okay, good." Then, craning his neck to check the kitchen, he asked, "Who is it?"

"Louise," Hadley whispered. "But I don't know that she did it, any longer. She was just about to tell me who might've, though."

Luke's eyebrows lifted. Then, instead of leaving like he should've since she hadn't invited him to join them, he walked into the kitchen.

"Why hello, Mr. Fenton," Louise called out.

Hadley closed her eyes and took in a calming breath. Luke was staying, apparently. She followed him into the kitchen.

"We're having tea. Would you like anything, Luke?" Hadley asked, walking to grab her own mug off the end table and take a sip.

He waved. "I'll get it." Luke began moving through her kitchen as if he lived there.

It was then that she remembered he'd stayed at their house a few times since they'd bought it about five years ago. Those weekends always had seemed to coincide with times Hadley had been gone visiting family or on a business trip away from Tyler, so she'd never been in her house with Luke. But he obviously knew his way around. And it was in that moment that she realized seeing him on her porch was the first time she didn't immediately think of Tyler when she saw him.

"I can leave," Louise said, standing.

As Hadley moved her focus from Luke to the older woman, she realized Louise was watching the two of them with a particular cat-got-the-cream expression on her face.

“It looks like you two have something to discuss, so …” She padded over to the counter and placed her mug gently on the island.

“No.” Hadley shook her head emphatically. “Nothing to discuss. There’s *nothing* going on here.” She motioned back and forth between her and Luke, who glanced over his shoulder from where he was bent over, rifling through her fridge. The smirk he shot her before focusing back on the fridge didn’t help things—at all.

“Paul just asked me to come check on Hadley, Mrs. S,” Luke called, without turning around, as if he were talking to someone inside the refrigerator. “You two can keep talking. Don’t even worry about me.”

Hadley, about to agree with him, paused. *Wait. He said he’d been driving by, and he was worried about me. Now he’s saying it was Paul who asked him to check in on me. Which is it? And is he changing his story for Mrs. Stanton’s benefit or mine?*

“Yeah,” Hadley said. “Don’t worry about him. I want to hear about why you were up in Cascade Ridge earlier.”

Louise blinked from Hadley to Luke. A pop rang through the kitchen as Luke opened a bottle of beer he’d found in the back of the fridge.

“But what about …” She pointed at Luke as he tossed the cap into the garbage.

“He’s fine,” Hadley said, waving in his general direction. “Won’t say a thing.”

He winked at Louise before tipping his head back and taking a long swig of the beer.

“If he does, I know how to beat him at both thumb and arm wrestling, so …” Hadley put a hand on one hip.

Luke almost spit out his beer, but collected himself into a surprised grin. “That was when we were eleven, Had.” He stood up straight and pushed back his shoulders. “I doubt you could take me these—” He cut out as he caught the way Hadley was just about eye-murdering him. Clearing his throat, he added, “But that’s beside the point. I promise I won’t tell anyone what you say in this kitchen, Mrs. S.”

Angry as she was with him, she had to admit the man had enough charm to calm a feral cat and Louise was definitely not immune to it. Ansel, however, seemed to be, since he’d disappeared at Luke’s arrival.

Louise smiled. “Well, all right. But this is only to help catch whoever did this to poor Edith. She and I may not have always gotten along, but that doesn’t mean I want a killer running free in Stoneybrook.” She took a deep breath. “The reason I was in Cascade Ridge today was because I had to sign the paperwork for the yarn shop.”

“But Dirk Croft owns that building.” Luke placed his beer on the

counter.

At this statement, Louise's gaze snapped up to meet his.

"He doesn't anymore, does he?" Hadley asked, the question a gasp. "He sold the building to a company in Cascade Ridge?"

"He threatened to sue me within an inch of my life if I spilled the news," Louise said. "He's been keeping it a secret for almost a year. Remember how the school board was choosing between two lots of land for the new high school last summer?"

Hadley nodded, but Luke didn't. He'd still been in Seattle. "One of the two pieces of property they looked at was Dirk's large lot by Edith's place and your family farm," Hadley explained to Luke.

"And Dirk had thought he couldn't lose," Louise added, "so he sunk a bunch of money into the land to get it ready for the school district purchase: cleared it, ran water and electricity."

"But then they went with the other piece of property," Hadley said.

"Leaving him in quite a bit of debt. According to what I've heard from Cascade Ridge Property Management this morning, he had to sell a few properties to them to cover his debt since they were the ones who took the land off his hands for him. Even now he still owes them a ton more."

"Hence him trying to push the golf course that they want to build there instead." Luke nodded, caught up. "The twenty acres he owns isn't enough for a golf course, but if he found a way to get ahold of Edith's thirty, that would definitely fit a solid nine-hole course."

Hadley took a sip of her tea. "And once the town denied their application for eminent domain last week, Dirk had run out of options. Even though Edith's sister wasn't a sure thing, Dirk could've been desperate enough to bet she'd want to sell the property. If he could get in touch with her and snatch up the land before anyone else, he would've fulfilled his promise to the Cascade Ridge company and would be on his way to finally paying them off."

"Which makes Dirk the most likely suspect in Edith's murder." Luke took another swig of beer.

"And it means his story about having lunch with Cathy *has* to be a lie," Hadley added. "Louise swears Edith was still alive when she left at …" She looked to Louise for confirmation.

"Eleven."

Hadley nodded. "Eleven; so the next person to visit her that morning must've been the killer."

Luke sighed. "I leave Stoneybrook for a few years and it's gone to pieces; people murdering each other."

Hadley, equally upset by the new development in her town, shook her head. "And the faster we get this figured out and someone behind bars, the less likely it is to happen again."

“Well, I’d better get going.” Louise put her tea in the sink on her walk over to her purse. “You let me know if you need anymore help.” She winked at Hadley. “With the case or your knitting. Also, we’re having a fundraiser in Edith’s honor next month. I’m wondering if you couldn’t think of something to can and add to the auction. Let me know.”

Hadley hugged the older woman. “I will. Paul might want to confirm all of this, by the way, so don’t be surprised if he comes by in the next few hours.”

Louise gave her a salute and then headed out to her car, leaving Hadley and Luke alone in her kitchen.

“So …” Hadley glanced around the room. She had kind of expected Luke to leave with Louise, knowing Hadley was just fine now. But he simply leaned back against the counter, getting comfortable as he took another drink from the beer he held.

“A lot’s changed since I left.” He met her gaze, making her feel slightly flustered.

She focused on her bare feet. “That’s what happens when you skip town for a decade. Though, I’d argue you left way before that.” She cautioned a look up at him.

He lifted an eyebrow. “You would, would you? Why’s that?”

“You were a different person senior year, even before any of us started talking college.”

Without saying it, she knew he would understand what she was talking about, how he’d gone from one of her best friends to one of her worst enemies. Hadley decided to leave out what she’d heard him telling Tyler about her, not sure she was ready to hear the truth.

He sighed. “I think you’re right. I was ready to get out of here. I honestly didn’t know if I would ever want to come back, but … I went and got all lost and sentimental in the city. I guess your thirties will do that to you.” He gave her a dry smile.

Hadley folded her arms across her chest. “I’d argue they’ve done the exact opposite for me.”

Luke’s smile faded. “Yeah, well we’ve always had a hard time being on the same page, haven’t we?”

His comment made her want to scream. *Same page?* They were far from that. The fact that he’d tried to get his friend to break up with her, telling him she wasn’t good enough for him, was akin to being in a completely different section of the library to Hadley, let alone not being on the same page.

Because she was now a woman in her thirties, and knew how to stand up for herself, she decided to fake a yawn and avoid talking to Luke any further.

“Well, I’d better hit the hay if I’m going to function around a hot

stove tomorrow." She smiled, but even she could tell there wasn't any happiness behind it.

Luke finished his beer and nodded. "Right." After rinsing the bottle in the sink and then dropping it into the recycling bin next to her garbage, he held her gaze and said, "Good night."

There seemed to be a whole library's worth of words behind his look, but Hadley couldn't find the energy to figure that out right now. She had a murderer to help catch.

20

Despite kicking Luke out with claims she was going to bed early, Hadley had been up half the night, tossing and turning, unable to turn off her brain. Add to that she started her cycle, and Hal had been completely out of any sort of feminine products, and she wasn't having the best day.

The one box of feminine products she'd bought from Hal two months ago must've completely cleaned him out. And when she'd asked him if he had any more in the back, he'd turned red, muttered something about more being on order, and then spilled the "take a penny, leave a penny" jar on the floor.

Which, unless Hadley was willing to drive all the way up to Cascade Ridge again, meant she was stuck with going into the Henley Family Grocer to buy the necessary supplies.

Between the way her eyelids felt like sandpaper and her cramps, she was not in any mood to deal with her ex in-laws. But she slunk into the store regardless, piling her basket high with all conceivable needs, so she wouldn't have to worry about this for a long time.

The sounds of twenty-year-old hits spewed through the speakers in the celling, while the beeping of the checkout machines kept an uneven beat. Everything was white, and it almost hurt Hadley to look at the bright place in her dark mood.

Trundling her basketful up to the register, she grabbed a bottle of iced coffee from the fridge near the conveyor belt then plunked everything down in front of Tara.

Tara glanced up. While older than Tyler, she shared the Henley family's dark hair and model good looks. She rolled her pretty brown eyes as she pressed the button to move the conveyor forward. Hadley, in no mood for anyone's attitude, dared her—with her thoughts, of course—to say anything rude.

"Heard you're talking about selling your place." Tara didn't make eye contact with her, just started putting her items into a bag as she rang up each one.

Hadley took a deep breath, expecting an admonishment about how Tyler still owned half the house, and she couldn't sell it without talking to him first.

“If you ever do sell, would you let me know? Bobby and I would love it. Our place is a little too small for us and two kids, and I’ve always loved the view you have, not to mention all of that land.”

“Uh, sure.” Hadley nodded slowly.

Tara smiled at Hadley. If Tara’s question had caught Hadley off guard, then the smile just about knocked her over completely. It also almost caused her to miss one very important detail about Tara’s question. How had she known that Hadley had been talking to anyone about selling the house?

She hadn’t done anything but—Hadley held on to the old check-writing platform to steady herself as realization washed over her. The only time she’d ever mentioned it was during her fake meeting at Cascade Ridge Property Management the day before.

Louise wouldn’t have said anything, since she didn’t want people to know she’d been there either, and that just left Suzanne, whom Hadley trusted implicitly. That was when she remembered. She was Tara Croft now. Bobby, Tara’s husband, was Dirk and Cathy Croft’s eldest son.

“How’d you hear about that?” Hadley asked, searching for confirmation.

Too late, Tara realized her mistake and redness crept into her cheeks. She looked down, probably just realizing she wasn’t supposed to say anything about the Croft family’s ties with Cascade Ridge.

“Uh, well Cascade Ridge Property Management is Croft Properties’ competition, so …” Tara shrugged. “Sometimes competitors stay in touch.”

Hadley stopped herself from saying, “Not any competing companies I know.” Instead, she shook her head. “I’m just checking out my options. Don’t worry. I promise I’ll talk to Tyler before I do anything with the house or the property.”

Tara scoffed. “What you do and don’t tell Tyler is your business. You’ve made your feelings for him *very* clear. I just want first dibs on that house.”

Narrowing her eyes, Hadley appraised her former in-law. She was too tired to fight with anyone, let alone someone who didn’t know any better. Hadley had known she would take the brunt of the criticism when she’d decided not to out Tyler and tell everyone what he’d done to prompt their divorce. And today wasn’t the day she would change any of that.

“Sure, Tara.”

Smiling, Tara told her the total, and Hadley paid for her supplies.

“Do you still have my number? Just in case?”

Hadley vividly remembered deleting all of the Henleys from her contacts one particularly frustrating day—except Mickie, of course.

She didn't feel like explaining that to Tara, though, so she waved a hand. "I know where to find you."

Tara must've wanted the house, because she'd never been so chatty.

She added, "I'm here Monday through Friday. Eight to Four. I take my lunch break from eleven to noon, but I usually just walk over to the Crofts and have lunch with Cathy, so I'm close by."

If Hadley had been a cat, like Ansel, her sleek ears would've twitched at Tara's statement. Dirk had said he often goes home to have lunch with Cathy, and that had been where he was on the Friday Edith was killed.

"That's nice," Hadley said, taking her receipt from Tara, but staying put. There was no one behind her in line, thank goodness. "Do Dirk and Bobby join you or is it just a you-and-Cathy thing?"

"Dirk and Bobby are much too busy, so it's just us girls." Tara grinned. "Unless Cathy has something come up, we try to lunch together every day."

No Dirk, huh? Hadley chipped at the nail polish on her right hand as she thought through the implications of this news. June Dougherty walked up behind Hadley in line, though, so she knew she couldn't stay and chat any longer.

"Okay, well I'll see you around, Tara." Hadley grabbed her bag and waved goodbye as she headed out onto Main Street.

Stopping as soon as she was safely out of the way of street traffic, Hadley pulled out her phone and texted Paul and Suze. She'd texted them in a group message last night to let them know of Louise's confession about the real reason she'd been lying about her alibi and how she wasn't likely the killer.

Scrolling past those texts, she added a new one.

Just found out that Dirk's alibi is most likely a lie. Tara says she has lunch with Cathy most days and Dirk is not there. You guys, I think Dirk is the killer!

Suze texted back almost immediately.

No, no, no. I just found out that while Hazel was at work, she forgot her lunch at home, so Robert drove it to her. Which means Robert was also lying about his alibi … Paul, tiebreaker here, man.

After a few seconds, Paul texted a response.

I will check into both alibis. You two, it's probably about time you butt out. If we're getting close to the killer, they're likely to make rash decisions. I wouldn't be able to forgive myself if either of you got hurt.

Suze quickly texted back. **Got it, but were you ever able to verify if the note in Edith's house matched Robert's handwriting**

or not? Asking for a friend, thanks.

No. I haven't been able to get a sample from him yet.

Just as Hadley slipped her phone back into her purse, Robert passed by her and walked into the grocery store she'd just left minutes before. Her eyebrows lifted in appreciation as she noticed how his sculpted arms and chest filled out his dark T-shirt.

Suze wasn't lying about him working out a bunch, she thought.

He kept glancing down at a grocery list. Hadley straightened. If Paul needed a sample of his writing, she knew just where to get one.

She hightailed it back inside, glancing once at Tara who gave her a questioning glare.

"Forgot something!" she mouthed, speed walking past the registers and into the store in the direction Robert had gone.

Paul couldn't get mad at her going after him in a grocery store. There wasn't a more public place in town—plus they had video cameras set up on most of the aisles—so she would be safe. Robert wouldn't even know she'd been anywhere near him if she could get close enough to grab the list from him while he wasn't paying attention. Then she'd have just what Paul needed. And Robert would simply think he was clumsy and had dropped the list on his trip down one of the aisles.

She tailed him through the cereal aisle—from sugar-heavy choices he made there, she was sure his ripped-body was not long for this world—through the dairy department—did a person really need two gallons of milk to themselves?—and then finally to the produce section—the place he was most likely to set down his basket and list.

But it turned out Robert's prison muscles made it easy for him to hold his basket while picking out produce. After walking through and grabbing a bunch of bananas, a head of lettuce, and a tomato, he turned toward the registers. Hadley sighed in frustration, about to give up when she saw him stuff the list into his back pocket. Just a tiny bit of the paper peeked out the top.

Wiggling her fingers—holding her own bag close by so it wouldn't crinkle and possibly give her away—she walked up behind him in line. She sidled closer, pretending to read a tabloid about celebrity weight loss. And just before he stepped up in line, she reached down to grab the edge of the paper.

Her fingertips closed around it and she tugged, freeing the paper just as Robert turned and said, "Hadley?" He looked down to see what she was reaching for.

21

Sure Robert would see the paper she was stealing from his back pocket unless she improvised, Hadley did the one thing she could think of.

She flattened the list into her palm and then smacked her hand onto his butt.

Robert's eyes widened. A rich red color seeped into his face. Hadley yanked her hand back toward her, depositing his list into her own bag.

"Spider!" she called out, stamping the floor a few times before shaking her head. "You're welcome. It was a big one. I hate it when they get away."

Valley spiders, especially close to the river, were infamous in Stoneybrook. Especially in the spring, when they seemed to be multiplying everywhere. Locals knew turning over river rocks could be a dangerous pastime.

"Sorry," Hadley said. "I wasn't trying to be creepy, just trying to catch the spider off guard. Sometimes I swear they can read minds."

"Oh. Uh, thanks." The redness only deepened in Robert's face.

Hadley checked her watch. "Well, I'd better get going."

Robert's forehead wrinkled as he pointed down at her bag. "Don't you need to …?"

"Pay for these? Oh, I already did." Hadley nodded to cover up the cringe she felt coming on.

Robert stared at her. "So why were you back in line?"

"Uh, I forgot ..." Hadley glanced around. "This." She picked up a magazine from the racks next to the conveyor belt and stepped into line behind him.

Robert smiled and asked, "How's Suze doing?"

Hadley clenched her teeth together. "She's great."

"Good. I mean, I saw her the other day. I just … Does she ever talk about me?"

Tempted to lie—lying would make the situation so much less awkward—Hadley bit her lip as she thought. "I'm sorry, Robert, she doesn't." Her ogling talk about his prison muscles aside, Hadley knew Robert wasn't her friend's type.

“Oh, I … right. I just thought since she hadn’t settled down yet, she might …”

Suze may not have settled down yet, but that was because she was holding out for the perfect guy. Perfect. And to her, that meant someone who was sweet, kind, supportive, and who wanted to live in a tiny mountain town with her and live happily ever after, paint splatters and late nights creating and all.

Her best friend had dated a few guys seriously in college, but even though she told them up front what she wanted, they never seemed to understand her level of commitment to staying put in this town. Nor did they ever seem to get how small Stoneybrook was until Suze brought them for a visit. Being big-city guys, mostly, they usually didn’t last more than a day before heading home early with fake stories of emergencies or illness.

And while Suze had been on a few dates with locals, she was rightly a little shy about dating someone from town after seeing the hell the locals had put Hadley through when she and Tyler had broken up.

Robert, who appeared pensive, said, “She looked at me differently the other night when she came to my welcome-home party at my mom’s house.” He flexed his arms slightly, not in a showy way, but almost as if he were disappointed in them for not winning him the girl.

Hadley decided not to bring up the fact that his mom’s house was now his house for the foreseeable future, and she wasn’t quite sure how well that was going to work with the ladies. She shook her head. “I’m sorry, Robert.”

He nodded, stepping forward as the person in front of him paid. Hadley almost felt pity for the guy. Almost. It was easy to fall for his act—the man was all sweet and puppy-dog like when he talked about Suze—but Hadley had to remind herself that the man had stolen, and from senior citizens at that. That was not the kind of guy she wanted for her friend.

Seeing her chance to break free, she said, “You know what? I probably don’t need this after all.” Before he could look back in her direction, Hadley returned the magazine and left.

The spring mountain air felt amazing as it hit her lungs, signaling her freedom from the store. She gripped the plastic bag in her hands. Her loot not only included feminine products, but also possible proof that might tell them whether or not Robert was their killer.

And so, even though she was already getting a bit of a late start on her jam making, Hadley made a beeline for the sheriff’s office rather than her kitchen. The office was housed in the town hall, along with many of the other integral parts of the town’s infrastructure. The

founders of Stoneybrook seemed to think more would get done if the departments were within walking distance of each other, hoping being under one roof might speed up bureaucracy.

Hadley pushed through the large double doors of the town hall and into the large, tiled hallway holding the offices of said bureaucratic cogs. Rather than agreeing with the founders' apparent concept, Hadley had always found that the close proximity just led to more of them standing around chatting in the hallway.

As it was, she ducked past a few town councilmen, the town attorney, and one of the local rangers, to push open the frosted glass door that said, "Grande County Sheriff's Department." Hadley headed inside, waving at Sharon, the secretary, as she bypassed her desk and went straight back to see Paul.

He was sitting at his desk squinting at his computer screen as if it owed him money or an alibi, or both. Hadley plopped the grocery bag on the desk in front of him, startling him with the rush of plastic.

Paul sat back, glancing up at her and then back down at the bag. He opened it, and the frown lines on his forehead only deepened.

"Uh, thanks?"

In her excitement, Hadley forgot exactly what her bag contained. Her cheeks heated up as she remembered the boxes of lady products.

"Not those … this." She plucked out the grocery list sitting on top of the boxes.

Paul unfolded the piece of paper and scanned it. "You need me to get you eggs and sweet potatoes? Weren't you just at the store?" He pointed to the bag, confused.

Hadley sighed. This was turning out to be much less dramatic than she'd pictured. In a movie, she could've plopped that down on the detective's desk, and he would've automatically known what she'd brought. All of the explaining she was having to do was really killing the energy of this reveal.

She heaved a put-upon sigh. "It's not my list. That's Robert's."

Paul's eyes widened as he took in the writing again. "Oh. Sorry, the handwriting is quite good and—"

"You thought it was a woman's writing." Hadley nodded. "Do you have the note from Edith's house?"

"It's in the evidence locker." Paul stood and gave Hadley a pointed stare. "Don't touch anything while I'm gone."

She put up both of her hands. "Gosh you're grouchy today. You eat enough this morning?"

He didn't even acknowledge her question with an answer, but left for the back office, grumbling something about an early lunch.

It seemed like Paul was gone forever. If he hadn't left the list on his desk with Hadley, she would've thought he was matching the

handwriting back in the evidence locker just to keep her out of it. As it was, the note from Edith's house seemed to simply be buried in a pile of other clues—from what cases in this small town, Hadley didn't know.

She studied the dated office. Between the old, humming computers and the full-wall wood paneling, she felt like she'd stepped back twenty years into a vintage cop drama. Except in this one, there weren't detectives and officers busily handing files over. There was just Kevin, sitting with his feet up on his desk reading through a file that appeared to be marked as, "Mrs. Clark's Raccoon Problem."

Finally, Paul returned, holding up a baggy with the note inside. She waited until he pulled it out and unfolded it.

"They already ran it for prints and found none, so we're fine to touch it." He flattened the piece of paper onto his desk and Hadley handed over Robert's grocery list.

The twins looked back and forth for a few silent seconds.

It was clear, all right.

What wasn't clear was how she felt about it. Paul glanced up at her, a sigh escaping his lips as his shoulders slumped a little.

"Not a match." Hadley bit her lip as she thought about what that meant. "It doesn't take him out of the running, but makes it harder to pin on him."

"Correct."

"Darn, I thought that tip from Pete was going to get me somewhere."

Paul raised an eyebrow. "You listening to post-office gossip again?"

Waving a hand, Hadley scoffed. "No." Her face fell. "Okay, maybe just a little bit."

"Remind me to make my annual threat to Pete about people's privacy." Paul shook his head.

"Pete didn't *exactly*—" she started.

Her brother held up a hand to stop her. "He never does, does he? For now, at least, this road is a dead end." He placed the paper back into its bag and sealed it. "I'll let you take this." Paul handed over Robert's grocery list.

"Thanks," Hadley said, disappointment weighting her voice. But then she remembered the reason she'd noticed Robert this morning in the first place. "Did you get my text about Dirk's alibi?"

"Yes, and Suze's about Robert. Those, it seem, are very much not dead ends. We're waiting to hear back from M&M about whether he wants us to bring anyone in for official questioning."

Hadley crossed her arms over her chest. "Waiting? What for?"

"This thing called due process." Paul chuckled. "Now get out of here and let me do my job. Don't you have some jam to make?"

“Yeah.” Hadley sighed. The thought of puttering around in her jam kitchen concocting a delicious recipe made her smile. Even the most difficult recipe had to be easier than attempting to crack this case.

22

Maddeningly, they weren't any closer to solving the case by the time Saturday and the market rolled around. It felt even worse since Edith's funeral was to be held that evening. Hadley wished they would've had this whole thing figured out by the time the town officially said goodbye to the opinionated Stoneybrook citizen.

So it was with a slight droop to her shoulders and shuffle to her step that Hadley set her booth up for the market that day. Even the weather, which was gray and overcast, seemed to be out of spirits. The rest of the market vendors were also subdued, knowing they would officially say goodbye to Edith later that day. And while she hadn't been anyone's favorite, it was still hard to believe she was gone.

In the booth next to Hadley, Suze put out her last print and sank back into her folding chair.

"It's dismal around here today." She frowned at the quiet market.

"People are …" Hadley paused. Sad didn't quite seem the word. "Unsettled."

"Well, I'll say." She rubbed her hands up and down her goosebump-covered arms. "We don't seem any closer to figuring out who the murderer is. At this point, it almost feels like we'd be better off putting our efforts into teaching Ansel to talk, so he can just tell us who killed Edith."

Hadley suppressed a giggle. Funny as the thought of Ansel talking was, she was as frustrated as Suze was about the lack of movement.

"Every time I ask Paul about warrants or arrests, he grumbles about McKay and shakes his head." Hadley sighed.

"You know, this pesky waiting for evidence idea is why police can't get stuff done."

A few minutes later, the market opened, and the rush of customers distracted them from their disappointment about the case. The dreary weather didn't seem to lessen the crowds in the least, though the shoppers were bundled up much more than usual.

During a lull toward the end of the market, Hadley stretched and asked Suze if she could go look around.

"I need to find some inspiration for this charity canning Louise

asked me to do for Edith's fundraiser."

Suze nodded. "She asked me if I wanted to donate anything this morning. I have a few paintings that might work." She yawned and sat back.

Hadley sauntered through the market, glancing at the beautiful handmade wares inspired by her tranquil mountain valley. The quilters had just finished a breathtaking mountain-scape wall hanging out of impossibly small strips of batik fabrics. Josie was on a horse-themed kick in her pottery designs. The intricate carvings she created on her bowls, mugs, and plates reminded Hadley of handmade stamps. The knitters had created a half dozen delicate eyelet shawls, perfect for pulling over one's shoulders when the spring air began to cool down at night, and a breeze began to kick up off the river.

Hadley loved living in such an artistic community. It had been one of the main reasons she'd been so sure she couldn't move away. Not that Seattle was without artists, but there was something about being surrounded by towering mountains and the rushing river that just seemed to spark inspiration inside people.

Lovely as it all was, however, Hadley made it to the end of the market without finding her own inspiration for something she could donate to Edith's fundraiser. Sure, she could simply make an extra batch of one of her bestselling jam flavors—people couldn't seem to get enough strawberry-rhubarb this time of year—but she wanted to create something special in Edith's memory, something just for the woman everyone found so bitter and confusing.

She found herself standing in front of the large Fenton Farms booth. Glancing up, she saw Luke. He raised a hand in hello, then stepped out from behind the table since he had no customers at the moment.

"You going tonight?" he asked.

Hadley nodded. "You?"

"Yeah." He shoved his hands in his pockets. "Any more luck with finding who's responsible?"

Sighing, Hadley said, "Nope. Neither Robert nor Dirk were the ones to send her the threatening note. Either one of them could've technically lied about where they were when Edith was killed. The only people who have confirmed their alibis are too close to them. Hazel would lie for Robert; we've seen that before. And Cathy would lie for Dirk, as would most wives, I think."

"Both have convincing motives." Luke ran his hand along his jawline.

"Very convincing."

The clouds drifted away from the sun and warm rays bathed the market in a golden light they hadn't seen all day. Hadley and Luke

stood there in silence and Hadley soaked up the feeling of sunlight on her skin.

Luke cleared his throat. “Look, Had … about the other day at your place …” He paused, taking a long breath.

Hadley waved a hand at him. “Let’s not worry about any of that, Luke. It’s all in the past.”

He watched her for a moment then dipped his chin. “That’s what worries me. Things have a way of getting bigger, worse, harder to overcome the longer we leave them.”

The longer you go pretending I don’t have a reason to be angry with you, Hadley thought. *Running away from the things you did and said.*

“They do,” was all Hadley said aloud, but all of the things she wanted to say burned in her throat, sitting there like a lump of coal. And from the way Luke was switching his weight from one foot to the other, it seemed he wasn’t saying everything on his mind either.

But suddenly, none of that mattered, because something clicked in Hadley’s brain.

“The past!”

Luke jerked slightly at her exclamation. “Yeah?”

“Edith’s sister said she was excited to get away because something from her past was giving her trouble again. Maybe the person who killed her was from a past further back than last year.”

Luke’s jaw clenched tight as he seemed to ponder her idea. “If that’s so, why wait until now to kill her?”

“Right.” Hadley chipped the last bits of pink polish off her nails as she thought. “I’ll have to think about that.”

“She grew up in Stoneybrook, so there are plenty of people who knew Edith her whole life. The trick would be finding someone who’s held on to a grudge all these years.”

Hadley nodded. There was a spark of sadness in her chest at Luke’s words, however, and her mind drifted back to their prior conversation. She’d been holding on to her anger at him for over a decade at this point. No matter what Luke had said, her failed relationship wasn’t his fault. And maybe they couldn’t go back to how things had been growing up, but if he was going to stick around, she might as well learn to be civil to him.

She gave herself a mental shake and returned to the present conversation. “We should keep our eyes open during the funeral, then. I’m sure that’ll be hotbed of people who had grudges against Edith.”

Luke smiled. “You gotta work hard to make an entire town mad at you.”

“She was dedicated.” Hadley shrugged, smiling. “The trick will be to siphon through the people who were merely in a nasty note war with her and the people who might’ve had something really intense

they hated her for."

"Don't they say all war has to do with love, money, or power?" Luke asked. "I'd look for a motive that falls into one of those categories."

"Good idea."

The market was winding down, and Hadley felt the itch to return to her booth. Before she left, however, she scanned the produce in Luke's booth.

"What's good today?" she asked.

"Berry-wise? We've got a new round of strawberries. You making more of the strawberry rhubarb? That's my favorite."

Hadley shook her head. "I made batches of that last week, so I'm good. I'm trying to find something to make for that charity event Louise was telling me about at my house the other night. I want to make something knitting related for Edith, but I feel like doing some pickling."

"We just harvested the asparagus." He gestured to gorgeous green bundles lined up in a basket to her left.

A smiled spread across Hadley's lips as she got an idea. "Oh, that's perfect. I'll take a few."

She paid for the produce and then waved goodbye to Luke. Heading back toward Suze, she thought about the idea of someone who'd been angry with Edith for a while, not just recently. Thinking of Luke coming back into town, Hadley could attest to the fact that old fights could feel just as fresh with a new development.

She just needed to figure out whom Edith had harmed enough in the past—someone who was recently reminded of this pain—and still felt strongly enough to do something about it.

❧

After the market, Hadley stopped by the grocery store again—it was getting easier each time. If Tara was surprised to see her in the store for a third time that week, she didn't say anything, simply rung up the coarse salt, onions, dill, and vinegar Hadley placed on the conveyor belt.

She had a few hours until the funeral and she couldn't think of a better way to spend it. Once she got to her kitchen, she lost herself in the preparation of the ingredients and the canning process.

Hours later, Hadley swiped her hands across her apron, smiling at the jars of asparagus cooling on the rack. They'd be perfect for Edith's fundraiser.

Pickled Asparagus Needles, she'd labeled them. Perfect for any bitter knitter.

Once she'd cleaned up her workspace, Hadley packed up and set out on her bike for home. She only got a few pedal-strokes down Main Street, however, before she passed by Suze's studio.

Like Hadley's kitchen, Suze's space had huge front windows that gave shoppers a glimpse of both her finished art displays and her workspace. And Hadley couldn't help but pass those windows without checking in on her friend. If Suze was working, she wouldn't bother her, knowing that an artistic muse was a fickle one, and she got grumpy when she was interrupted while she was in the zone.

Today, however, the muse seemed to be the woman of the hour herself. Hadley stood under her teal-and-white awning and watched as Suze swiped at a few finishing strokes of a beautiful, large portrait of Edith Butler. Her friend had an amazing way of taking her paintings to a particularly abstract level, yet still maintaining the spirit of the subject. And the portrait she was staring at was Edith through and through.

Even though Hadley hadn't made a sound, Suze glanced back. It was as if she'd felt Hadley's intense gaze burning through her back. Her eyebrows creased tight and she motioned to the door with a tip of her head.

Hadley met Suze at the entrance, flipping the lock but leaving the **Art happening—Please come back later** sign in place.

"What's up?" she asked, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand and spreading a streak of indigo across her skin.

"Guess I wasn't the only one who needed to get lost in my work before this funeral." Hadley smiled.

Suze nodded, letting her inside. "What you were talking about—someone holding on to a grudge toward Edith—makes sense; it just felt overwhelming. I mean, there's practically a whole town of suspects, then."

The door shut behind them, and Hadley plopped herself down on the couch in the corner. "But remember, it still needs to be someone who was recently reminded of this problem, so it can't be just anybody. I keep thinking back to Dirk. The man is just about the same age as Edith was, right?"

Suze nodded.

Hadley continued. "Which means he could easily still be our guy. If we are looking at a crime from the past, I doubt Robert's got anything to do with that. He's our age, so I doubt he hung around Edith when he was younger."

Suze washed her hands. "Yeah. Well, if we're going to learn anything new, we'd better get to this funeral."

Hadley agreed. They left, splitting off to their respective houses to get ready. Hadley was sure, though, that she would never feel ready to say goodbye to Edith until she managed to bring her killer to justice.

23

Back at her house, Hadley smoothed the soft fabric of her trusty black dress. She frowned slightly as she plucked a few white hairs off the hem, then glanced back at the little black-and-white cat perched on her bed who watched her intently with his amber eyes.

"You been getting in my closet?" she asked, pointing accusingly at him, but erased any censure with a smirk.

Ansel only purred louder and blinked happily at her.

"I wish you could come with me to pay your respects to Edith." Hadley walked over to him, holding her hand out. She ran her fingers over his sleek fur. "But she knew how much you loved her, didn't she?"

He meowed in response.

Glancing back in the mirror, she tugged on a long curl and watched as it bounced up when she released it. She normally pulled her dark hair into a bun or ponytail, preferring the simplicity, but for special occasions, she'd break out her curling iron and put a little more effort into it. That, in addition to makeup above her normal chapstick and hastily applied mascara, and Hadley had to admit she didn't look half bad.

With a goodbye pat on Ansel's head, Hadley grabbed her purse and walked out the door.

Suze was picking her up, as Hadley wasn't keen on riding her bike in a dress, and her shoes were too uncomfortable to walk the mile into town. She'd said she'd pick her up at five thirty, so Hadley traipsed outside and leaned on her fence at five fifty. Suze was late at the best of times, but when she was expected to wear anything other than paint-splattered overalls and a bandana covering her curly locks, Hadley knew the wait would be longer than normal.

As it was, Hadley knew she was still early, but she didn't mind. Since the market ended, the sun had managed to break through the cloud cover, and it had warmed up considerably. She sighed, tipped her head back, and listened to the rush of the river. While she and Tyler had hoped to purchase a house right on the river, this one had come up for sale, and it had ticked all of their boxes but that one, so they'd conceded on that point. And even though she couldn't see the

river from her place, there weren't many spots in Stoneybrook where the rushing current wasn't audible on some level.

About five minutes later, Suze pulled up. Hadley spotted the portrait Suze had been working on earlier stuck sideways in the back seat.

The automatic window rolled down, and her friend gave a wolf whistle. "Climb in, hot stuff."

Hadley chuckled as she followed directions. "You're not too bad yourself, lady."

Suze was wearing a black tank top and a flowing black skirt, but she looked put together and gorgeous. With her light brown hair, she could get away with doing smokier eye makeup than Hadley. Whenever Hadley put anything more than a light pink on her lids or lips, she felt like some sort of vampire princess with her almost-black hair.

Before putting the car in drive, Suze lifted up one foot, showing off her Birkenstock-clad foot.

"You can make the girl from the northwest dress up, but you can't take away her Birks."

Hadley laughed, having a very similar connection with her many pairs of the earthy sandals. She buckled herself in and Suze took off toward town.

The more spread-out houses of Hadley's neighborhood began to clump closer and closer together as they neared Main Street. Hadley loved taking the last curve, where downtown came into view. The brick buildings all lined up looked cute as could be. Suze pulled into the church parking lot and nodded.

They followed a crowd of people walking in from the parking lot, waving and smiling at the other locals who'd come to pay their respects.

Paul nodded to them from across the room and they moved in his direction. He was speaking with a blond woman in her fifties who dabbed at her eyes with a mascara-spotted tissue.

"Hadley, Suze, this is Jennifer, Edith's sister." Paul motioned to the woman, adding, "Jennifer, my sister Hadley was the one who was taking care of Edith's place … or, was supposed to." He dropped his gaze, obviously a little embarrassed by his slip.

Jennifer stepped forward and clasped Hadley's hand in hers. "Of course, Edie was telling me about you. How sweet you were to watch over her cat. I'm sorry I couldn't take him."

"Oh, he's no trouble at all. Are you staying at Edith's place while you're in town?"

She shook her head. "I'm at the River Inn, but I will have to spend some time cleaning the house out and getting it ready to sell in the

next few days." Her lips twitched down. "I just can't handle the cat fur for that long, not to mention the fact that I'd rather not be there at night, if you know what I mean."

Hadley smiled. It was hard to think of Edith's cheery little yellow house being anything but welcoming, but she understood Jennifer's feelings, especially with the circumstances of Edith's death.

"And what do we have here?" Jennifer asked, gesturing toward the portrait Suze clutched next to her.

"I thought we could put it up today," Suze said, flipping around the painting so Jennifer and Paul could see it. "Do you have a place where you're putting pictures of her?"

"That's lovely." Jennifer beamed. "Yes, there's a picture table down in the basement for the reception after. Thank you."

Suze nodded. "Edith was Stoneybrook through and through. She will be missed."

Suze hadn't said *she* would miss her, Hadley caught, but still applauded her friend for maintaining a respectful demeanor in front of Jennifer.

Jennifer's nostrils flared slightly, and then she stifled a laugh.

Suze's eyes went wide, and Hadley watched the woman to make sure she wasn't having a mental breakdown or something.

"Oh, it's okay, dear. I know you're just being nice. She could be difficult. You don't have to lie to me. She was my half-sister, actually, and twenty years older than me, so we had an interesting relationship. But I loved her, and you're right, she will be missed by a few special people."

Before Suze could even close her mouth from the shock, the knitting group pulled Jennifer away from them to go talk to someone else. She waved and said they'd catch up later.

"She seems nice," Hadley said, unsure how to fill the odd silence.

Paul said, "She's having a harder time than she's letting on, I think."

The women agreed, and they took their seats as Kenny Harkin began playing the piano, signaling the beginning of the service.

At the last moment, just as Louise led Jennifer toward the front row and they had a seat, someone slipped into the empty chair to Hadley's right. Even dressed up in a dark-gray suit, the man still managed to smell like earth and fresh air. She leaned over to Luke as Pastor Grant took her place at the podium.

"Cutting it a little close there, Fenton," Hadley whispered out the corner of her mouth.

He leaned close before whispering, "Saving the best till last."

When she glanced up at him, he winked, making her unsure if she wanted to laugh at his antics or groan at his arrogance. She did have

to admit he looked handsome. His sandy-blond hair was combed back out of his face, and he'd shaved the couple weeks' worth of stubble he'd been sporting since he got back into town. Hadley bit back a smile as she noticed a small piece of tissue paper still clinging to a nick on his jawline.

Plucking it off, she said, "Or some people just take a lot longer to primp."

He chuckled and rubbed the spot with the back of his hand. Bumping her with his shoulder, he whispered, "Shhh, you're distracting me and I don't want Pastor Grant getting mad at me. She still hasn't forgiven me for backing into her mailbox … those five times." Facing forward, he schooled his features into a focused scowl.

Kenny stopped playing the piano and once everyone was silent, Pastor Grant smiled and said, "Welcome, friends. Forgiveness is such an important word."

Hadley and Luke turned to look at each other. Either the pastor had heard them or the woman could read minds. Hadley giggled quietly, and Luke pressed his lips together to stifle his own laugh.

Suze elbowed her, frowning as Hadley turned to face her. "You two are acting like silly teenagers over there."

Paul leaned forward and shook his head at them, dark eyebrows furrowed in forced disappointment.

Luke cleared his throat and focused on the pastor, as did Hadley. She moved her leg to bump into his, signaling to him that she didn't want to get in trouble again as the pastor started in on her sermon.

It was, as promised, all about forgiveness. Hadley thought she did a very good job highlighting the fact that Edith hadn't gotten along with everyone, while focusing on the fact that they still wanted to honor her memory and celebrate her life. A few people got up to speak, saying kind things about Edith's role as a local business owner and her charity efforts when it came to organizing knit-a-thons for newborn hats and afghans for the Grande County Hospital up in Cascade Ridge.

Hadley made sure to watch for anyone who seemed disgruntled or mad, but it was hard to tell with a view of the backs of people's heads, and she felt rude constantly turning to look behind her. She would have to wait until the reception.

Once Pastor Grant dismissed everyone, they went down to the church basement for the reception. Even with just about the whole town in attendance, there was still room to move around and for Hadley to stand back and observe. People from Stoneybrook often joked that if there were ever a natural disaster such as an earthquake, they could all fit into one building and live together in harmony.

And while Hadley couldn't argue with the size of her town, she

had begun to wonder about the harmony part. Harmonious towns didn't have people who went around murdering old ladies … or anyone, for that matter.

Hadley leaned her back into the church basement wall and sighed. She wasn't used to viewing her friends, the people she'd grown up with and around, in such a distrustful and scrutinizing way.

Spotting Jennifer across the room by a table of pictures of Edith, Hadley sucked in a short breath. Maybe what she needed was an outsider's perspective. She headed for Jennifer, determination pushing back her shoulders as she walked.

And if not an outsider, at least someone who knew Edith when she was younger and might know of any long-held grudges against her.

24

Jennifer was staring down at a picture of her sister on her wedding day. Edith looked gorgeous. She'd always been a pretty lady, with bright eyes and a large smile. But it seemed as she grew older that light had faded slightly, and she showed fewer and fewer people her smile.

"She's back with Henry, finally," Jennifer said as Hadley sidled up next to her.

In the picture, Edith's late husband, Henry, stood next to her. His handsome face was just about split in half by the huge smile he wore. Hadley remembered when he'd passed away while she was in high school. Edith had been almost inconsolable.

In fact, that had been when Edith had turned so sour, when her anger took over. It had been the beginning of the passive-aggressive notes, the picking of fights with other business owners, and the retreating into her knitting shop.

"They sure were a perfect couple, weren't they?" Hadley said.

She hadn't ever thought about it through her self-centered, youthful lens, but the Butlers were a beautiful, happy couple who really seemed to understand what it meant to be soul mates. Thinking of the past brought to mind the very reason she'd sought Jennifer out. Before she lost her nerve, she decided to just go ahead and ask.

"Jennifer, I know this is probably a painful subject, but you mentioned to the police that Edith had been eager to come for a visit because something from her past was bothering her. Do you have any idea what that was?"

Frowning, Jennifer shook her head. "Like I told your brother, she was vague on the phone."

"And there's nothing you remember from back when you were growing up? No one that would've held a grudge this long?"

"Well …" She pulled in a deep breath. "There were decades between us, and Edith had graduated from high school before our parents got together and had me. So we didn't share everything like you would think. We actually didn't grow close until we were much older."

Hadley sighed, resigned to the fact that Edith had taken some

secrets to the grave with her.

But then Jennifer said, “When Henry passed all of those years ago, however, I do remember her talking about something …” The woman pursed her lips as she seemed to be locating the memory in her brain. “She mentioned how she and Henry had gotten together amid a bit of scandal, that it had been a bit of a triangle situation.” Jennifer squinted. “I’m not sure if I’m remembering that correctly.”

“That could be something.” Hadley straightened at the tip. “An affair would definitely be something for a person to hold on to this long.”

Jennifer giggled a little. “Oh, dear. We’re not talking about an affair at all. They were much too young for that. Didn’t you know they were high school sweethearts?” She picked up the old Stoneybrook High yearbook sitting on the table next to the guestbook and flipped through it until she landed on a picture of Henry and Edith standing with crowns on their heads, big grins on their faces.

Hadley smiled. “I didn’t …” She wanted to say more, but felt sort of mesmerized by the photo of a young Edith and Henry.

A chill danced down her spine. At home, in a newer, but still aged Stoneybrook High yearbook, she had an almost identical picture of her and Tyler. High school sweethearts, homecoming king and queen. Alike in so many ways, but different in so many that mattered.

Edith and Henry had met the “Until death do us part” part of their vows.

“Hadley, is everything okay?” Jennifer placed a hand on her shoulder and leaned forward to meet her eyes.

She hadn’t realized it, but her face had pulled into a tight frown, and a tear had slipped down her cheek as she’d been staring at the photo. Relaxing her face and swiping away the tear, Hadley said, “I’m so sorry, I’ve—it’s just been a rough couple of months.”

Jennifer tipped her head to one side. “Would you like to talk about it, hon?”

Hadley exhaled a small, sad laugh. Of course she wanted to talk about it. She wanted to spend all day talking through her feelings about Tyler and what he’d done and the doubts running through her head about what she’d done to contribute to the problem. And at the same time, she wanted to shove all of those feelings inside and never think about them again, pretend they didn’t exist and that her life was all smiles, and sugar, and jam, and laughs.

“I—I don’t know how …” She blinked over at Jennifer. The woman was still watching her, kindness evident in her soft eyes as she waited. Hadley sucked in a deep breath. “Actually, yeah, I kind of do.”

“Tell me about it. What’s got a lovely woman like you so down?”

Hadley said, “That was me. I was homecoming queen with my high

school sweetheart, but we've just recently divorced." Looking behind them and noticing a line of people who wanted to peruse Edith's pictures, she added, "I can't exactly talk about it here. Maybe some other day while you're in town."

Jennifer patted her hand. "Definitely. You come by Edith's any day this week and tell me all about it. In the meantime, I want you to have this." She closed the yearbook and handed it to Hadley. When Hadley opened her mouth to protest, Jennifer said, "And I won't take no for an answer. We've got plenty of other pictures of her for today. Keep it as proof that the right person is out there for everyone. Just because it didn't work out the first time doesn't mean you can't still find your true love."

Hadley held the yearbook tight and nodded, not sure she trusted her voice. Someone called Jennifer over to their group, so Hadley took the opportunity and stepped into the small area between the table and the wall, pulling in a few deep breaths to collect herself. She was completely hidden by Suze's large watercolor portrait and the picture collages Jennifer had put together.

After a few seconds and some rapid blinking Hadley finally felt okay to come out, but a gruff voice stopped her.

"This isn't the time nor the place, Catherine."

Dirk Croft.

Hadley slowed her breathing and ducked a little lower behind the canvas.

"Well when is?" His wife, Cathy, hissed the question out at him.

"I said, not here."

"After what you've put me through, I think I deserve to talk wherever I want."

"Cath, I'm trying to fix it. I can't undo what I've done, but I'm trying to fix it. Just let me do that, okay?"

"Fine." Hadley could just about hear Cathy's teeth clenching together.

"Now, come on. I can't stand to look at him any longer, especially not next to her."

"I thought you said you'd dropped all that?" There was a teasing sneer in Cathy's tone as their voices faded.

"I have," Dirk grumbled, almost out of Hadley's earshot. The Croft's voices were replaced with another group of mourners.

Drop all what? Hadley wondered. *Had he been the third person in their high school love triangle? Did he hold a grudge against Edith all of these years later that she hadn't picked him?*

Clutching the yearbook tightly to her chest, Hadley slipped out from behind the table, scooting behind a few large groups so she wouldn't be seen until she was standing near the refreshments table.

Just when she thought she was in the clear, someone stepped up behind her, very close.

"Hiding and stealing at a funeral," Luke whispered in her ear. "Hadley James, the years have changed you." He made a fake tsking sound with his tongue and smirked as she turned to face him. "And not all for the better, I'm afraid."

Glancing down at the yearbook, Hadley said, "Jennifer gave this to me. I didn't steal it. What kind of a person do you think I am?" She had the urge to smack his arm like she used to when they were kids, but thankfully held back.

"But you were hiding, then?" He cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Luuuke." She groaned, stretching out his name. "I don't have time for this right now. I need to find Paul." She looked past him at the crowd.

Dirk might very well be the killer. She needed to tell her brother.

Luke's face darkened, any childish teasing leaving his features in an instant. He nodded. "He's over there." Luke pointed to the refreshments table.

With a quick "thanks," Hadley made a beeline through the crowd, careful not to bump anyone as she wove through—a good portion of Stoneybrookians fell squarely in the AARP category.

Paul was just finishing up one of Mickie's famous sugar cookies when Hadley reached him, her hand clasping around his arm like a lobster claw. He jumped.

"We need to talk. Now." She dragged him into the hallway behind them.

It wasn't until she turned to face him that she realized that Luke had followed them.

"Don't start without me!" Suze said, racing in from the main room as well. When Hadley gave her a questioning look, she added, "I spotted you blazing through the crowd from across the room, Had. I know you just found out something big, like win-the-race big."

Luke cocked an eyebrow at her. "What race?"

Suze just waved a hand to dismiss him and leaned forward. "So, what is it?"

Hadley explained to them about Edith's love triangle and Dirk's apparent dislike of Henry.

"They all went to high school together, just like all of us," she said. "I think Dirk was the other guy, and I think he's been holding a grudge this whole time. The property fight, on top of all of his money troubles could've been more than enough to push him over the edge." Hadley sighed, happy to have it all off her chest.

Paul seemed to agree with her assessment, because he pulled out his phone. "Luke, go find Kevin. Tell him to meet me out at my truck.

I'm going to call McKay and see if we finally have enough to justify bringing him in for questioning."

Luke nodded and disappeared back inside the main room. Hadley and Suzanne stood in the hallway, waiting to see what happened, hoping Paul was right.

25

Later that night, Hadley curled up on her couch with a plate of her mother's famous lasagna. She still had a few portions left over in her freezer from when she'd been in the throes of her divorce and hadn't felt like moving from under her covers, let alone cooking herself a meal.

Her mother had been a huge comfort for her during that time—her whole family had, in fact. Other than Suze, she'd always been lucky to call her family her friends—and similarly, when it came to Suze, she felt she could call her friend family. She couldn't wait until her mom and dad got back from their extended visit with Gran in Oregon.

But Ansel was comforting her in their absence. While the little guy usually curled up in the general vicinity of where she was in the house, tonight he was purring away in her lap. She wasn't surprised, though. Cats had instincts about that kind of thing. He had been giving her extra attention ever since she got home.

She sighed, leaning back into the cushions and closing her eyes. It had been an eventful night. McKay had conceded to bringing Dirk in for questioning. Paul and Kevin waited until everyone left the funeral reception and then followed the Crofts home, where they picked up Dirk for questions pertaining to the murder of Edith Butler.

Cathy had broken down when Paul and Kevin had shown up. She admitted to them right there that Dirk's alibi had been false. She was sorry for going along with the lie, but had been embarrassed. Cathy had suspected he was lying about his whereabouts for weeks and had thought he might be cheating on her. She had never imagined he'd hurt anyone.

Hadley understood the embarrassment of being cheated on. The pain she felt at Tyler's betrayal was still palpable, as if he'd actually punched her in the stomach instead of—well, instead of what he did. The money he was spending on business trips had been the source of many arguments between the two of them over the past two years. And she'd been suspicious when his company began sending him on more trips, to more exotic locations. But it was Tyler. She'd known him her whole life and trusted him wholeheartedly.

To her own detriment, apparently.

As it turned out, he was careful, and very good at lying. Eerily so. It had taken an email from his mistress telling Hadley what had been happening for the past two years to open her eyes. Christina, as she signed her email, was sick of Tyler telling her he was going to leave Hadley. She figured an email, getting it out in the open, would kick him into action.

Though the email hadn't had the desired effect on Tyler—he promised he would stop seeing Christina, that it was over—it did kick Hadley into action. She filed for divorce and spent the money she had left—that Tyler hadn't spent on his clandestine getaways, that were most decidedly *not* work—on a lawyer. It was the reason she'd had to put the jam storefront idea on hold, the reason she still rode a bike around town. The fees for the divorce added to his dalliances before it, had all but wiped her out.

Between the cheating and their money he'd thrown at his affair, Hadley could've had the whole town on her side during the breakup. But an odd thing happened when she thought about telling them during those first few days; she realized that even with everything he'd done, she didn't want to destroy him or his reputation. If he wanted to tell his family, the people they'd grown up with, that was his decision. She didn't want to have to bear that burden.

As it was, he hadn't said anything, but had moved to Seattle—Hadley assumed to finally be with Christina now that she wouldn't have him—and Hadley had seemed like the terrible, finicky woman who'd divorced the town's golden boy for no reason.

Putting her now-empty plate of lasagna aside, Hadley slipped out her high school yearbook. She'd dug it out once she'd gotten home, but needed a full stomach before she thought of opening it.

She flipped to her homecoming picture with Tyler. His big smile and dark, floppy hair had been irresistible to her back then—to all the girls, really. But he'd always only had eyes for her, ever since they turned seventeen and he'd kissed her over the river bridge one starry night.

I suppose I have to amend that to he used to only have eyes for me, Hadley mused as she flipped the page and found the scrawling signatures and well-wishes of her classmates and friends. Most were friendly, gushing over fun memories, but there were a few that made Hadley frown.

Richard Stewart had written a crass, "Peace out, Had. Getting out of this town. Smell ya'll later." Then there was Bella Green, who'd simply written, "I should've been homecoming queen." Luckily, Hadley and Bella had since buried whatever hatchet had been between them in high school and Hadley often visited her at her father's bookshop in town.

Something clicked in Hadley's brain at the thought. The things people wrote in yearbooks were often poorly veiled attempts to cover up all manner of high school drama and strife. Hadley's focus shifted to Edith's yearbook on her coffee table. Would the same be true for Edith's friends?

Hadley hadn't heard anything from Paul since they arrested Dirk, but maybe if she could find even more proof, it would make Paul's job easier.

She leaned forward and swapped her own yearbook for Edith's. She looked in the front, through the pages, and in the back. Dirk Croft hadn't signed Edith's yearbook at all. Hadley scrunched her forehead together in frustration.

About to close it, one of the notes caught Hadley's eye. "I will never forget you and Henry." She pulled the book closer, her heartbeat rising steadily as her gaze traced over the familiar handwriting. Then she looked at the signature and shook her head.

There's no way.

Suddenly the clues began to make sense, to fall into place.

Or is there?

She scooted Ansel off her lap and grabbed her phone from the counter, dialing Paul.

"Hey." He sounded so tired, she could practically hear the slump of his shoulders through the speaker.

"Do you have that writing sample from the threatening note with you?" Hadley tapped her fingers on her counter, needing an outlet for her anxiety as she waited—her pink nail polish was history after the week she'd had.

"Uh, it's in the interrogation room, I think. Had … we had to let Dirk go."

"Good. He didn't do it."

"What? How do you know that?"

"Well, I won't know for sure until you send me a picture of that note."

"Hold on." Paul's breath came in short puffs as it sounded like he was jogging somewhere. "Okay, coming through."

Hadley put the call on speaker and held it in front of her so she could see the picture as soon as it came through; sometimes it took a while out in the mountains as they were.

Paul kept talking while she waited. "Dirk had an alibi, was off meeting with the guy from Cascade Ridge Property Management during lunch off and on over the last few weeks. He was lying to everyone because he didn't want anyone to know he was working with them because then we'd find out how much financial trouble his company is in and how much he owes this Cascade Ridge company.

But they've got him on camera. And McKay finally located Robert's letters to Edith in one of her drawers. They were apology notes. He'd written them in prison, but had been too nervous to send them, so he started mailing them once he knew he was going to have to live in Stoneybrook for a while. It wasn't him either."

Nodding absentmindedly while she listened, Hadley focused on the picture as it came through. She looked at the yearbook, then back at the picture just to be sure.

"It's Cathy. That's her handwriting. Cathy killed Edith."

"Hold on; I'm coming over."

"Has Dirk left yet?" Hadley pleaded.

A relieved exhale whooshed out of Paul. "No. I'll have Kevin keep him here. Hold tight."

Hadley didn't even have the wherewithal to hang up the call, instead letting it go dark when Paul hung up on his end. Her brain was working too hard figuring out how Cathy had almost gotten away with it all.

Her yearbook message would've appeared normal enough to anyone, but the handwriting had caught Hadley's attention. Then she'd read it again, knowing that Jennifer had mentioned a person standing in the way of Edith and Henry's budding relationship. It hadn't been Dirk in love with Edith, but Cathy in love with Henry. And Henry had chosen Edith, not Cathy.

Hadley glanced down at the picture of the threatening note that had been left on Edith's counter. **You've already taken what's mine once. I won't stand for it again. Watch your back!** Cathy must've thought Edith was after Dirk.

A few minutes later, tires squealed to a stop outside, and footsteps thumped up her walkway. The sound of the front door slamming shut sounded as Paul jogged into her kitchen.

Snapping her fingers, Hadley said, "She thought Dirk was having an affair with Edith!"

Paul shot her a questioning look.

"Dirk wasn't telling about his meetings in Cascade Ridge, so I'm guessing he didn't tell her that he was trying to get Edith to sell her land. Luke said he'd been over there a lot lately, trying to convince Edith. Cathy must've found out he was spending time at Edith's and jumped to the conclusion they were having an affair. After losing Henry to Edith, she wasn't about to lose Dirk too."

Paul glanced at the picture of the note and the writing in the yearbook.

"And because she was Dirk's fake alibi, we never thought to look into where she was."

Paul got on his phone and motioned for Hadley to follow him out

to his truck. She grabbed the yearbook and her phone at the last moment.

"Yes, sir. We're sure. Absolutely. Got it." Only hearing one side of the conversation as they jogged outside, Hadley assumed he was talking with Sheriff McKay.

Pulling open the passenger door, she launched herself up into the cab of the deputy truck. Paul dropped his phone onto the center seat and peeled out, driving toward the Croft's.

"You're going to stay in here. I'm just going to ask her some questions. McKay's calling in backup, but since she implicated Dirk, he thinks it's a possibility that she might try to run after letting her husband take the fall. If you see anything, you're to call Kevin, but for no reason should you leave this truck. Understand?" He looked at her, taking his eyes off the road for a second until she nodded. For an annoyingly safe driver like Paul, Hadley knew that meant he was dead serious.

Worry seemed to materialize into a lump in Hadley's throat as Paul pulled up to the Croft's dark house. He parked and unbuckled almost simultaneously.

"Be careful," Hadley whispered around the unbearable lump in her throat.

"I'll be fine. Kevin's on his way."

With that, Paul slipped from the driver's side of the truck and walked up to the front porch. She saw him knock a few times before heading around to the back of the house, disappearing from sight.

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Hadley locked the doors like Paul had told her to, then squinted into the darkness for a few seconds—which felt like years. Her stomach flipped and rolled as she sat there, helpless.

Pulling in a few long breaths, Hadley tried to calm herself. Paul was right. He was just asking Cathy some questions. If she was even there. Plus, if she did get any funny ideas, Paul was practically a giant and worked out a ridiculous amount of time every week. Pie-baking, registered-nurse Cathy wouldn't stand a chance against him.

Hadley needed something to do, needed to take her mind off her worry.

Realizing she still clutched the yearbook, she flipped it open, glancing up to make sure she was still watching the house for any movement after scanning each page.

Halfway through the yearbook, she saw something that made her blood run cold.

The page featured the extracurricular clubs, including Stoneybrook High's Sharp Shooters. And front and center, rifle in hand as if it were as comfortable as her own appendage, stood a young Cathy.

Hadley glanced up at the dark house, eyes wild in their search for anything. She hadn't heard a shot, but Paul was walking into a much different situation than he'd prepared for. Hadley clenched her teeth and growled in frustration, unsure of what to do. Paul would be furious with her if she left the truck.

Her fingers nimbly unclipped her seat belt, and she silently crept out of the truck, into the cool night.

An angry Paul is better than a dead one, she told herself as she moved closer to the house.

As she approached an open window on the side of the house, voices trickled out on the night breeze. Hadley could hear a low voice she recognized as Paul's and then a higher one she assumed was Cathy's. While they both sounded calm, Hadley needed to make sure Paul was okay. She walked around the back, stepping carefully onto the porch.

The kitchen light glowed bright yellow in the windows. Hadley's breath caught in her throat. Cathy had a handgun pointed at her own

temple.

"Cathy, please."

Paul's voice was calm, even, but it held a tightness Hadley recognized as fear. She took a few steps forward and he came into view pointing his gun at her, but there was a pain written across his face.

"What's the difference? You're going to shoot me anyway."

He shook his head. "I'm not. I'm only here to ask you some questions."

Cathy scoffed. "You wouldn't be here unless you knew."

Paul let out an audible sigh. "You killed Edith. You're going to have to answer for that. Don't make it worse, though. Think about Greg and Bobby."

At the sound of her son's names, Cathy's hand began to loosen its grip on the gun; it dipped slightly from her temple.

"They still need you around."

For a second, it looked like Cathy might put the gun down, but she pushed her shoulders back and tightened her grip. "As long as you have that gun pointed at me, this one stays right here."

Hadley's spine stiffened at her tone. The evenness, the calm in her words, made the woman sound reasonable, but Hadley had a bad feeling. Especially when Paul said, "Okay, here. I'm putting mine down."

She closed her eyes and sent a quick prayer up to the sky, then opened them back up just in time to see Cathy drop her own gun. But instead of putting it down, she pointed it right at Paul's chest.

"You James twins were always too trusting."

Fear coursed through Hadley's body. Everything seemed to slow as she watched Cathy adjust her stance and move her other hand up to steady her shot. Her finger moved on the trigger.

Jumping at the back door she was crouched next to, Hadley yanked it open and screamed, "No!"

Hadley's entrance caused the woman to turn her body slightly just as the gun went off. Taking advantage of the element of surprise, Hadley launched herself forward and dropped her shoulder like Tyler taught her when they were practicing his football moves in high school.

She tackled Cathy. From the "omph" that escaped her as they fell onto the kitchen floor, Hadley guessed she'd succeeded in knocking the wind out of the older woman. And from the way Hadley struggled to breathe, Cathy wasn't alone. Scrambling around on the floor until her knee was sort of pinning Cathy down, Hadley wrestled the gun from her grasp and slid it behind them.

"I've got her, Paul." She panted over Cathy's coughs and growls of

anger.

Hadley almost felt like smiling, celebrating, until she realized that the kicked-in-the-chest feeling wasn't dissipating. Eyes wide, Hadley turned, glancing over to where Paul had been standing.

Where he was now lying on the floor, not moving.

Her heart stopped. The room began to tilt.

"Paul? Paul!"

She glanced down at Cathy, squirming under her weight, wanting nothing more than to run over to her brother. But Cathy would surely run if she was given the chance and there were two guns loose in the room. Hadley couldn't risk it.

Tears gathered in her eyes, but she didn't have a free hand to wipe them away, so she shook her head, trying to clear her vision enough. It felt like someone stabbing her in the heart to look at him, but she couldn't give up.

"Paul, come on. Get up," she pleaded, the last part a whisper.

And then he groaned, sitting up slowly.

Hadley laughed, tears streaming down her face. Through the blur, she could see a crimson spot on his shoulder. But before she could focus too much on it, the back door slammed open and Sheriff McKay stormed in, followed by a handful of officers. She couldn't see straight enough to count them.

"Kevin, we need an ambulance here, now." He grumbled and lumbered over to where Hadley still held Cathy.

Closing handcuffs around her wrists, he freed Hadley to stand and rush to her brother's side. There were a few officers surrounding him, but she pushed her way through until she was clutching his hand.

She swiped at her eyes so she could see clearly, but seeing the blood staining his tan uniform brought on a new round of tears. He was still sitting, not even trying to get up, and was wobbling slightly.

An officer came up behind him and held some thick gauze up to his wound, pressing tight. "Looks like it went through, James," the man said, to which Paul nodded.

McKay pulled Cathy to her feet. Another officer led her out the back door.

"I'm so sorry," was all Hadley could think to say as she looked back to Paul.

He let out a raspy chuckle. "Had, why are you sorry? You just saved my life."

She blinked. "I did?"

"That gun was aimed right between my eyes. If you hadn't distracted her, causing her to aim lower, I would be a goner right now." He shook his head, or maybe he was just wobbling from the blood loss.

“I was looking through Edith’s yearbook to keep me distracted while I waited and saw that she’d been in the sharp-shooters club. I knew I had to come warn you.”

Paul swallowed. “Well, if I’d have known that, I probably wouldn’t have set down my gun.”

Hadley knew Paul was hard on himself, especially when it came to his training. “You couldn’t have known. Plus, you thought you were doing the right thing by making her feel less threatened, like she had more options.”

He wheezed out a laugh. “I just didn’t realize one of those options was shooting me. This small-town sheriff business isn’t as quiet as I thought it might be. I need to stay on my toes a little more.”

Just then, paramedics swarmed into the room. Hadley stepped aside as they loaded Paul onto a stretcher. She followed close behind, then insisted she be allowed to ride in the ambulance with him.

“I’m his twin sister,” she said matter-of-factly, as if it might give her a pass.

The Cascade Ridge paramedics glanced from Paul to Hadley. “You don’t look like it, but okay.”

Hadley didn’t care if they didn’t believe her. She climbed in next to him, taking his hand in hers and gripping it tight the whole way to the hospital.

27

One month later ...

The Stoneybrook community center was packed. Gorgeous arrangements from Valley Wildflowers sat on either side of the stage and as centerpieces on the tables in the back of the room. Hadley smiled as her basket labeled Pickled Asparagus Needles went up for bid at the first annual Edith Butler Charity Auction. She'd added a set of actual knitting needles sticking into two balls of variegated sock yarn for effect.

She'd unraveled the sock yesterday as she put the basket together. It had turned out wavy, an odd mixture of too tight and too loose. The result had been … unwearable, and there was no way it would fit a human foot, or an ankle—not to mention a calf. Her mother had appreciated the thought. Actually, when she saw the picture Hadley sent her, the woman had laughed so hard she'd cried but had been fine with Hadley saying she was going to try a shawl instead of a sock. Sure she needed much more practice before attempting socks again, Hadley decided someone else might be able to appreciate the wool.

The auctioneer, Louise, started the bid at fifty dollars and it began to climb, quickly reaching one hundred. When it sold for one hundred sixteen dollars to Hal, Hadley was delighted. All of the profits from the auction were going to the local animal shelter in Edith's name, and she was happy to have done her part.

Speaking of doing her part for the local animals, Hadley clutched the paperwork in her hands to officially adopt Ansel. Jennifer had brought it by as a thank you and a goodbye just before leaving town that morning. It was a good thing, too, as Hadley had fallen head over heels for the little cat and wasn't about to let him go.

Looking behind her, Hadley found Paul and Suze standing with Kevin. They applauded her on the success of the asparagus basket and sent her beaming smiles to match her own.

While out of the worst of his bandages, Paul still sported an odd sling concoction the doctors had given him to keep his shoulder as immobile as possible. The bullet had nicked his collar bone, resulting

in a stress fracture, which doctors said was well on its way to healing.

Regardless of the injury, Paul looked the most relaxed he'd seemed in months. After taking a bullet in the line of duty, McKay had awarded him with a law enforcement purple heart and had all but abandoned his plan to put his nephew in Paul's place—especially after said nephew got hired on in a larger town just north of Seattle.

They took her basket off the stage and moved on to the next item, a beautiful light-pink shawl with a gorgeous pattern snaking along the edging.

Hadley felt someone sidle up next to her. It was Luke Fenton. He dipped his head.

"Nice job with that basket. It seems like it was a hit."

"Thanks. I hope Edith likes it."

"I'm sure she loves it."

"How are you feeling about having new neighbors soon?" she asked.

"Mixed." He sighed. "It'll always be Edith's place to me, but I'm glad another family will get to live there for now."

After spending the few weeks in Stoneybrook cleaning out her sister's home, Jennifer had decided to keep the house. She didn't want it turned into a golf course any more than the rest of the community, so she was renting it out until she decided exactly what she wanted to do with it.

"I need to get out of the tenant house at some point, though." Luke shook his head. "I feel a little too much like a hermit living back in the woods, surrounded by fields."

Hadley laughed. "Tell me about it. I think I need to start looking for a new place too. Living so far from town is peaceful, but lately it's just me, Ansel, and my thoughts. And those are getting a little loud. Plus, there's too much history there for me to stay." She realized too late she'd let that statement slip. She kept any talk about Tyler to a minimum around Luke as a rule.

He didn't seem to be mad, though. Then he held her gaze with his and sighed. "Had, I didn't know. I mean, not at first. When I found out what Tyler was doing, I told him to stop. He told me he would, but apparently it kept going on."

Hadley's mouth parted in surprise. She didn't know what to say, didn't trust her voice, so she just nodded. It wasn't closure, but it was something. She just wasn't sure what yet. They watched the next auction item sell for over a hundred dollars and clapped as they carted it off the stage.

"Luke," she said after a few moments. "Only a few people—"

"Don't worry," he said, cutting her off. "I know you're not telling people what Tyler did. I don't agree with it, but I'm not going to be

the one to spread it around if you don't want me to."

He reach out and squeezed her arm gently before walking off to talk with his sister.

A peace settled over Hadley as she looked out at her town, crowded into the community center all to celebrate the memory of someone half of them hadn't even liked all that much. For the first time since her divorce, things were starting to feel like they were getting back to normal in her town.

Cathy had confessed to adding the fatal dose of medication to Edith's tea and had been convicted of both premeditated and attempted murder. She'd originally gone over to confront Edith about the affair. When she saw Edith's bag packed, Cathy jumped to the conclusion that Edith and Dirk were going off to meet each other, and she snapped. Poor Edith was none-the-wiser when Cathy offered to make some tea to drink while they *chatted*.

Dirk really had just been worried about his own blood pressure after the stress of bad financial deals and hiding his Cascade Ridge partnerships from everyone, even his wife. The day he'd asked Hazel about a blood pressure medicine overdose, he'd been asking about himself since he'd upped what he was taking and was worried he might be overdoing it.

Robert was moving back to Seattle, having found a friend he could stay with until he got his feet back under him. Hadley didn't know what that would look like and she didn't care, as long as he wasn't stealing from any other people to get ahead. And Louise was doing her best to keep Edith's memory alive, telling everyone how grateful she was every day that her boss trusted her enough to leave her the knitting shop.

Hadley glanced back at Suze and Paul. Suze said something that made Paul laugh his loud, booming laugh, and she socked him in his uninjured arm.

If nothing else, life was getting back to normal in Stoneybrook. Now if they could just manage to keep it that way.

Both of the following recipes are created by Marisa McClellan, creator of Food in Jars.



Strawberry Rhubarb Jam

Makes 3 pints

- 4 cups of chopped strawberries (about 2 pounds)
- 2 cups of chopped rhubarb (about 1 pound)
- 4 cups sugar
- 3 tablespoons powdered pectin
- 1 lemon, zested and juiced

Prepare a boiling water bath canner and 3 pint jars.
Place the chopped berries and rhubarb in a large, non-reactive pot. Whisk the pectin into the sugar and stir it into the berries. Let it sit for 10-15 minutes, until the sugar has begun to dissolve.
Place the pot on the stove and bring to a boil. Cook jam over high heat, stirring regularly for 20-25 minutes, until it takes on a thick, syrup-y consistency.
Add the lemon zest and juice and stir well.
Check for set by taking the temperature of the cooking jam (it should set around 220F) or by watching how the droplets fall off the spoon. Remember that it will thicken as it cools, so don't cook it so long that it achieves your desired consistency while still hot.

Remove the jam from the heat and ladle it into the prepared jars, leaving 1/2 inch. Wipe the rims, apply the lids and rings and process them in a boiling water bath for 10 minutes.
When the time is up, remove the jars and set them on a folded kitchen towel to cool. When the jars have cooled enough that you can comfortably handle them, check the seals. Sealed jars can be stored at room temperature for up to a year. Any unsealed jars should be refrigerated and used promptly.

Pickled Asparagus

Makes 3 pints

- 3 pounds asparagus
- 1 1/2 cups apple cider vinegar
- 1 1/2 cups water
- 2 tablespoons pickling salt
- 3 teaspoons mixed pickling spices
- 3 garlic cloves, peeled
- 3 slices of lemon

Prepare a boiling water bath canner and 3 pint jars.

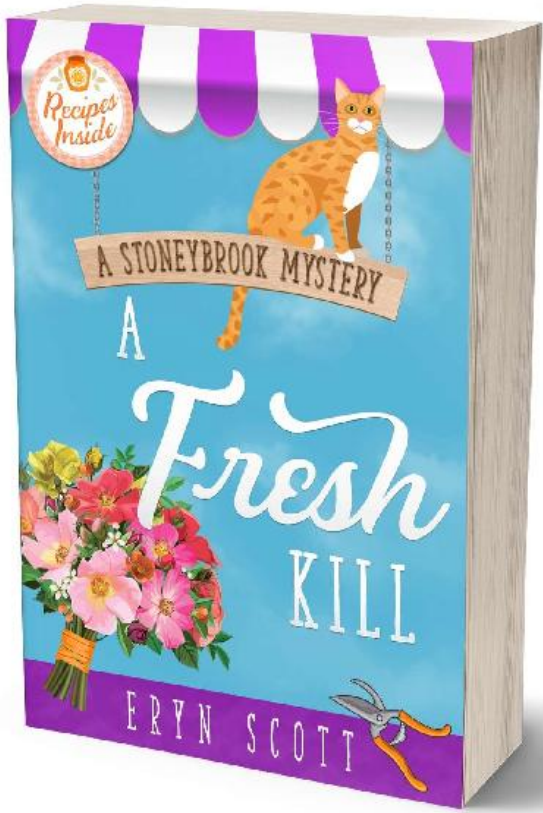
Wash the asparagus and trim it so that it will fit in your jars, leaving about 1/2 inch of headspace.
Combine the vinegar, water, and pickling salt in a pot and bring to a boil.

Remove the jars from the hot water bath. Put the lemon slice in the bottom and measure 1 teaspoon of pickling spice into each jar.
Pack the trimmed asparagus into the jars (it's up to you to determine whether you want to go tips up or down). Tuck a garlic clove down into the asparagus spears.
Slowly pour the hot brine over the asparagus spears, leaving 1/2 inch for headspace. After all the jars are full, use a wooden chopstick to work the air bubbles out of the jars. Check the headspace again and add more brine if necessary.
Wipe the rims, apply lids and rings, and process in a hot water bath for 10 minutes.
When the time is up, remove the jars and set them on a folded kitchen towel to cool. When the jars have cooled enough that you can comfortably handle them, check the seals. Sealed jars can be stored at room temperature for up to a year. Any unsealed jars should be refrigerated and used promptly.
Wait at least 24 hours before eating, to give the asparagus spears a chance to absorb the brine. Don't worry if the spears initially look

wrinkled. Over time, they will plump up again.

Visit Marisa's blog and website, Food in Jars, for tons of recipes, tips, product reviews, and links to her books.

Don't miss the next book in the Stoneybrook series:



Competition stings …

There's nothing like the Stoneybrook farmers market in summer. Fresh flowers, organic veggies, delicious jams … and a dead body. When an outsider turns up murdered, all the evidence points to his rival, Stoneybrook's beloved florist.

Unable to believe a pillar of their community could be guilty of such a heinous crime, Hadley dives head-first into the investigation. Sure, she's busy looking for a new house, running her business, and

dealing with her ex—who's back in town—but Hadley is determined to find the truth before the wrong man is put in jail.

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About the Author



Eryn Scott lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and their quirky animals. She loves classic literature, musicals, knitting, and hiking. She writes cozy mysteries and women's fiction.

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